NFL PREVIEW '14

DOUBLE ISSUE | 9.1.2014 | SI.COM

Sports Illustrated

66 PAGES OF DEEP-DIVE **SCOUTING REPORTS** BY ANDY BENOIT

+

THE DANGER ZONE

BY TIM LAYDEN

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PETER KING'S SUPER BOWL PICK

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Oz Sanchez, Paralympic Gold Medalist. Photo credit: Tiffany Brown/Las Vegas Sun

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2014 NFL Preview

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Sports Illustrated

SI.COM

FOR SEPT. 1, 2014

Frosh Start

In each of the past two seasons the Heisman Trophy winner—and college football's most exciting player—has been a freshman. Can it happen again in 2014? This week **SI.com** takes a look at 10 first-year players poised to make an impact this season. Is LSU running back **Leonard Fournette**, who has been branded the next Adrian Peterson, all hype or is he ready to deliver in Baton Rouge? Can Texas A&M wide receiver Speedy Noil help College Station get over the loss of Johnny Football? Will Michigan cornerback Jabrill Peppers be the next Charles Woodson? Check out **SI.com/college-football** for the complete list and for the latest news on your favorite teams.

FanNation

The new FanNation fantasy sports app allows you to select a set of MLB players each day for the Baseball Throwdown. Challenge your friends for cash prizes or just for bragging rights. To learn more, go to **fannation.si.com**

RISINGSTARS

To see a video interview with this week's Rising Star, Browns linebacker **Barkevious Mingo**, and SI.com's entire Rising Stars series presented by Symetra, go to **SI.com/risingstars**

COUNTDOWN TO NFL 2014

Check out **SI.com** and **TheMMQB.com** for the latest analysis and predictions from our NFL experts

8.28 / THURSDAY

Chris Burke's 2015 NFL Draft Big Board 1.0. Yep, we're thinking about it already

8.29 / FRIDAY

Roundup: Preseason highs (**Blake Bortles**!) and lows (Johnny Manziel!)

9.1 / MONDAY

Preseason All-Pro picks, plus Peter King kicks off the 18th season of his Monday Morning Quarterback column

9.2 / TUESDAY

Prediction Tuesday! The staffs at SI.com and TheMMQB.com reveal their Super Bowl picks and postseason awards

9.3 / WEDNESDAY

Debut: 2014 Power Rankings

9.4 / THURSDAY

Don Banks: Opening night preview, Packers vs. Seahawks. (Remember what happened last time they met?)

9.5 / FRIDAY

Don Banks: Week 1 picks, from ATL-NO to SD-AZ

120 SPORTS

Put Up or Shut Up

Which NFL quarterback has the most to prove this season? 120 Sports hosts Ovie Mughelli and Tyler Jacobs have two names in mind: **Eli Manning** (10) and **Jake Locker**. Says Mughelli, a former NFL fullback, "People think this is the year that Eli comes back, but have you seen him this preseason? It hurts to watch." Adds Jacobs, "Locker has had three years in the league and has only proven he's a great athlete. But how good of a QB is he? That's what he has to answer this year." For more from Mughelli's and Jacobs's *Point/Counterpoint*, and 24-hour access to video highlights and analysis, go to **120sports.com** or download the free mobile or tablet app.

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GERALD HERBERT/AP (FOURNETTE); ROB FOLDY/GETTY IMAGES (BORTLES); MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES (MANNING); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (LOCKER); DAVID RICHARD/AP (MINGO)

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Leading Off

FROM THE LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES

1 of 3

Butler Fly Effect

Centerfielder DJ Butler of Chicago's Jackie Robinson West team, the U.S. champion, ran down a deep drive from Seoul's Jae Yeong Hwang in the fifth inning of the championship game on Sunday in South Williamsport, Pa. The representatives of the Asia-Pacific group won 8–4 to take South Korea's first LLWS title since 1985.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
GENE J. PUSKAR
AP

20
14
Little League
WORLD
SERIES
WILLIAMSPORT, PA
BASEBALL

Leading Off

FROM THE LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES

2 of 3

Seoul Train

Hae Chan Choi (21) enjoyed a choreographed celebration with his South Korea teammates after drilling a solo homer in the sixth inning on Sunday. The heavy-hitting LLWS champions averaged 8.4 runs in winning all five of their games in South Williamsport.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROB CARR
GETTY IMAGES

21
EASTON
Asia-Pacific
REGION
17
EASTON

Leading Off

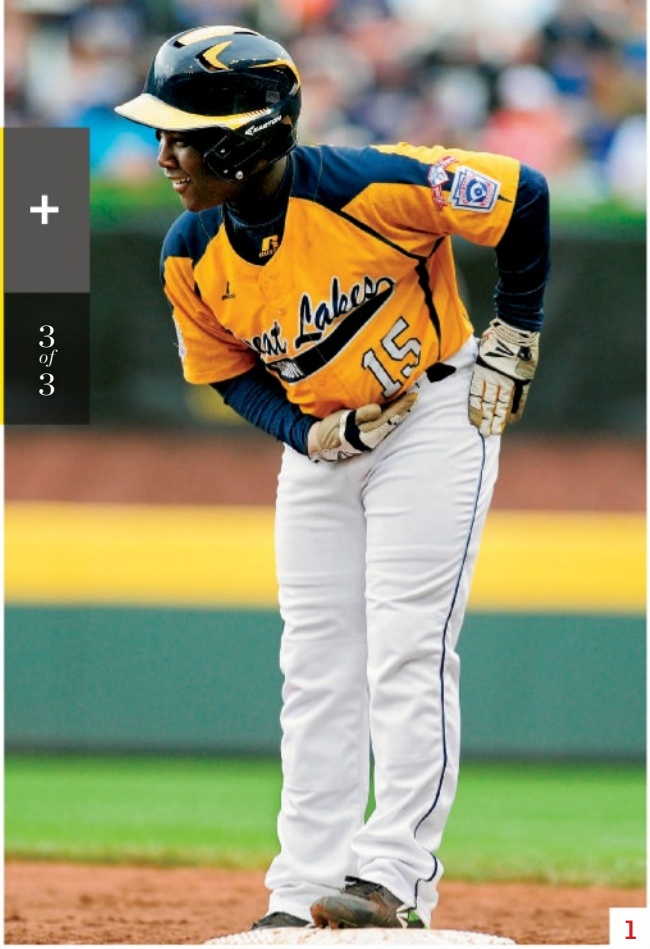
FROM THE LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES

+

3 *of* 3

Weekend Wonders

The teams from Chicago and Seoul put on a show in reaching the Little League World Series final. Among the sights: **1** Darion Radcliff took a bow for his RBI single in the U.S. final, a 7–5 win over Nevada; **2** a South Korea coach went flying after Sunday's victory; **3** Brandon Green drove in the go-ahead run against Nevada; **4** DJ Butler (1) exulted with Pierce Jones after eliminating Philadelphia 6–5 last Thursday; **5** Green hurled the first five innings of the title game; **6** Jae Yeong Hwang gave some postgame dap to Marquis Jackson (16); and **7** Green let loose after Saturday's win.



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USA TODAY SPORTS (1, 6, 7)
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GETTY IMAGES (2, 5)
MATT SLOCUM
AP (3)
GENE J. PUSKAR
AP (4)

5

6

7

INBOX

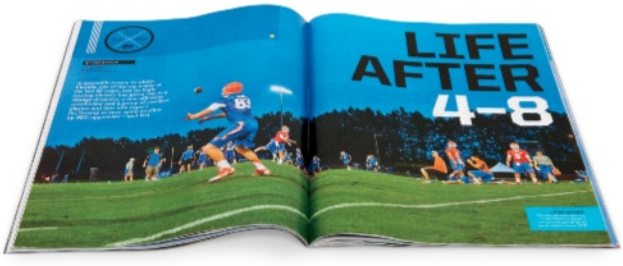
FOR AUG. 18, 2014

College sports have become nothing more than big business. Hiring a coach like Bobby Petrino, who can definitely fill the stadium but who does not have the integrity to lead the young men entrusted to him by example, speaks volumes.

Bruce Fritz, Westport, Conn.

How can you exclude Wisconsin running back **Melvin Gordon** from your 2014 Heisman watch? He rushed for 1,609 yards and had 12 touchdowns last season. Surely he deserves some consideration.

Jeff Blanch, Birchwood, Wis.



Florida is the only team scheduled to play both Florida State and Alabama this year—on the road, no less. Here's hoping there really *is* life after such a dismal season.

Scott Ludwig, Senoia, Ga.

Sure, there is some truth in Andrew Lawrence's assessment that **Kevin Ward Jr.**'s life would have been spared had he stayed in his car. However, this seems to place the blame solely on the 20-year-old victim. As a NASCAR veteran, Stewart also bears some responsibility.

Gary M. Crist
Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

COVER

FACEBOOK

Choosing **Ohio State** for your final four is proof that SI, like the rest of the country, underestimates Michigan State and its stalwart defense. Hopefully, after dashing the Buckeyes' Rose Bowl dreams once again, the Spartans will finally get the respect they're due.

Jeremy Simpson
Portage, Mich.

PAGE 24

SCORECARD

Lance Armstrong's response to Dan Patrick's question about whether he should still be referred to as the seven-time winner of the Tour de France—"It depends"—shows that Armstrong still does not comprehend the totality of his deception.

Ken Ries, Greenville, S.C.

PAGE 116

POINT AFTER

I agree with **Michael Rosenberg** that Jameis Winston deserves to be treated fairly and not be overanalyzed for his past transgressions. However, that doesn't mean Winston should get a free pass. After all, misdemeanor theft is still a crime, regardless of what was stolen.

David Wise
Hyde Park, N.Y.

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+ Scorecard

Edited by / JIM GORANT / TED KEITH

Bronx Bummer

Thanks in part to a barren farm system, the Yankees' post-Jeter years will look a lot like the shortstop's farewell season: not very bountiful

BY TOM VERDUCCI

OPPOSING CLUBS are sending Derek Jeter off to retirement with gifts so frivolous that it appears as if they were bought during a drunken *SkyMall* shopping spree. Among the parting gifts the Yankees shortstop has received are pin-striped cowboy boots, a pin-striped Gibson Les Paul guitar, a personalized bottle of Napa Valley wine, a set of golf clubs, a pin-striped paddleboard, a Stetson hat and, of course, a gold watch.

At least nobody had the gumption to present him with an October cruise, seeing that New York looks like a team that should be free that month. In fact, despite shelling out $438 million last off-season to free agents Carlos Beltran, Jacoby Ellsbury, Brian McCann and Masahiro Tanaka, the Yankees are staring at the possibility of missing the postseason for a second straight year, something they haven't experienced since 1992 and '93, which just so happen to be the last two full seasons before Jeter's arrival. With 34 games to play at week's end, New York trailed first-place Baltimore by six games in the American League East, while 3½ games and two teams stood between the Yankees and the second wild card. The Bronx Bombers' 3.95 runs per game were third worst in the AL and the franchise's ninth worst since Babe Ruth arrived in 1920.

How in the name of Horace Clarke—the helmeted second baseman who symbolized the franchise's postseason drought from 1965 to '75—could this happen? The answer lies in how the Yankees climbed out of their last playoff drought and into the greatest dynasty of the free-agent era. They won 88 games in 1993 with 24-year-old Bernie Williams in centerfield and had a farm system loaded with future stars such as Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada

and Mariano Rivera, not to mention contributors like swingman Ramiro Mendoza. Young, homegrown talent would provide the backbone to New York's four World Series titles in five years, beginning in 1996.

The farm has been fallow ever since, with some exceptions from players who signed as international free agents, like Robinson Cano. In the 22 drafts after the Yankees picked Jeter in 1992, Brett Gardner is the only hitter they have drafted and signed whose cumulative Wins Above Replacement (23.3) with the team is better than a middling 3.1. Phil Hughes (56 wins) and Joba Chamberlain (24), both of whom the Yankees gladly allowed to leave as free agents last off-season, are the biggest winners on the mound for them out of the draft since taking Pettitte in 1990—though rookie reliever Dellin Betances was an All-Star this year.

The lack of homegrown players has forced New York to dive into two areas that have become enormously inefficient: aging players and free agents. According to baseball-reference.com, the 28 players who have come to the plate this season for the Yankees have an average age of 32.7, giving them the oldest lineup in baseball for the third straight year. There are nights when an Eagles concert seems less nostalgic than Yankee Stadium. New York is so old that just in the past two seasons it has used 11 players who were All-Stars *nine or more years ago*: Beltran, Jeter, Pettitte, Rivera, Soriano, Brian Roberts, Alex Rodriguez, CC Sabathia, Ichiro Suzuki, Mark Teixeira and Vernon Wells. Last year the Yankees churned through 57 players, the most in baseball, and this year manager Joe Girardi has juggled 53, second to the 60 used by the Rangers.

What can they do? As the Phillies are finding out, turning around old teams is harder than turning around an ocean liner. The Yankees already have almost $143 million committed next year to eight players who will be between 31 and 39. They'll still need a shortstop to replace Jeter, a third baseman unless they re-sign 30-year-old Chase Headley, and starting pitchers in case Sabathia (knee) and Tanaka (elbow) can't return to form after significant injuries.

This old, dull team at least has enjoyed the farewell tour of Jeter, whose announced retirement plan during spring training has helped the Yankees to the majors' fourth-biggest per-game attendance increase. But imagine next year, coming off a possible second straight non-playoff season with the 39-year-old Rodriguez returning from a PED suspension and three previous seasons in which he averaged only 88 games . . . and no Jeter?

Jeter has played in more than 2,700 games for New York, and the team has been mathematically alive in all of them but one (Sept. 26, 2008). He has been the most important player in the sport's greatest era of economic growth, an October fixture and a five-time world champion who, with the help of the expanded playoffs, has played in more postseason games than anyone in history. But unless the gasping Yankees summon a September rally, they will be sending Jeter to retirement with the most inappropriate gift: more meaningless games than he has played in his entire career. □

+ GO FIGURE

2,635

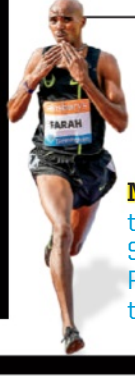
Consecutive NBA games worked by referee **Dick Bavetta,** who retired last week after 39 years in the league. He never missed an assigned game.

28

Years since MLB had last upheld a protested game before the Giants' successful objection to their 2–0 loss at Wrigley Field on Aug. 19, when the game was delayed for four hours after the grounds crew was unable to unroll the tarp during a rainstorm.

15:28.36

World-record time in the women's 1,500-meter freestyle by 17-year-old American **Katie Ledecky** at the Pan Pacific Swimming Championships, more than six seconds faster than her previous record.



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Mo Farah's winning time in the two-mile race on Sunday at Sainsbury's Birmingham Grand Prix, breaking a British record that had stood for 36 years.

ILLUSTRATION BY DARROW; KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS (BEVETTA); BRIAN KERSEY/GETTY IMAGES (WRIGLEY FIELD); RICK RYCROFT/AP (LEDECKY); STEPHEN POND/BRITISH ATHLETICS/GETTY IMAGES (FARRAH)

SPORTS SCIENCE +

Pro Forma?

Mo'ne's chances for the majors

"I WANT TO throw like a girl" read the posters in Williamsport, Pa., when Mo'ne Davis, the 5' 4" righthander from South Philly, fastball'ed her way into America's heart during the Little League World Series. Even after her team, the Taney Dragons, lost in the U.S. semifinals, Davis's performance left a question standing on the mound: Could the first girl to pitch a shutout in the LLWS become the first woman to pitch in the majors?

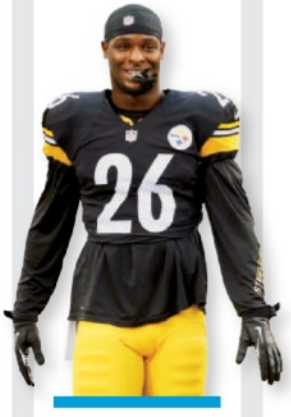
"I wouldn't say it's impossible," says former SI senior writer David Epstein, author of *The Sports Gene: Inside the Science of Extraordinary Athletic Performance*. But Davis is already behind in the count. Starting in the womb, Epstein explains, boys develop with a genetic advantage specific to pitching: their forearms grow longer in proportion to the rest of their arms, creating a more forceful throwing whip. With the onset of the "natural steroid cycle" of puberty, as Epstein calls it, that trait is only exaggerated. Plus boys generally grow taller than girls, and at the top level the size of an athlete's pitching stride correlates closely to pitch velocity. Besides the science, there is the reality that there are plenty of boys who can throw a 70-mph fastball like Mo'ne but never get near the majors, let alone the minors.

But don't count her out, Epstein says. Davis is doing at least one thing right. Along with baseball, she participates in soccer and basketball, and says her dream is to play college hoops for UConn. Counter to the prevailing notion that early specialization is key to a pro career, studies show that future elites actually practice less on average in their eventual sports than near-elites and that most U.S.-born big leaguers play multiple sports through high school. "Mo'ne looks like she's shaping up along the path that elites typically take," Epstein says. "She's going about it perfectly."

—Alexandra Fenwick

THEY SAID IT

"I didn't know that you could get a DUI for being high."



Le'Veon Bell
Steelers running back after police found marijuana in the car he was driving on Aug. 20. He and fellow Pittsburgh back LaGarrette Blount were charged with misdemeanor possession; Bell was also charged with DUI.

Read an excerpt of The Opening Kickoff *at* **SI.com/college-football**

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Lars Anderson
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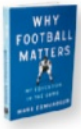

Why Football Matters
Mark Edmundson
Reconsiders the game's old saws—character building, courage, etc.—in the new light of the concussion age.
#thoughtful#thought-provoking

The Opening Kickoff
Dave Revsine
Fascinating, well-researched college history shows how money, eligibility, powerful coaches and bad actors corrupt.
#sameolsameol

Season of Saturdays
Michael Weinreb
Beautifully written mix of memoir and reportage that tracks college ball through 14 key games, giving depth and meaning to all.
#beachread

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (DAVIS); CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA (THE STORM AND THE TIDE); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (BELL)

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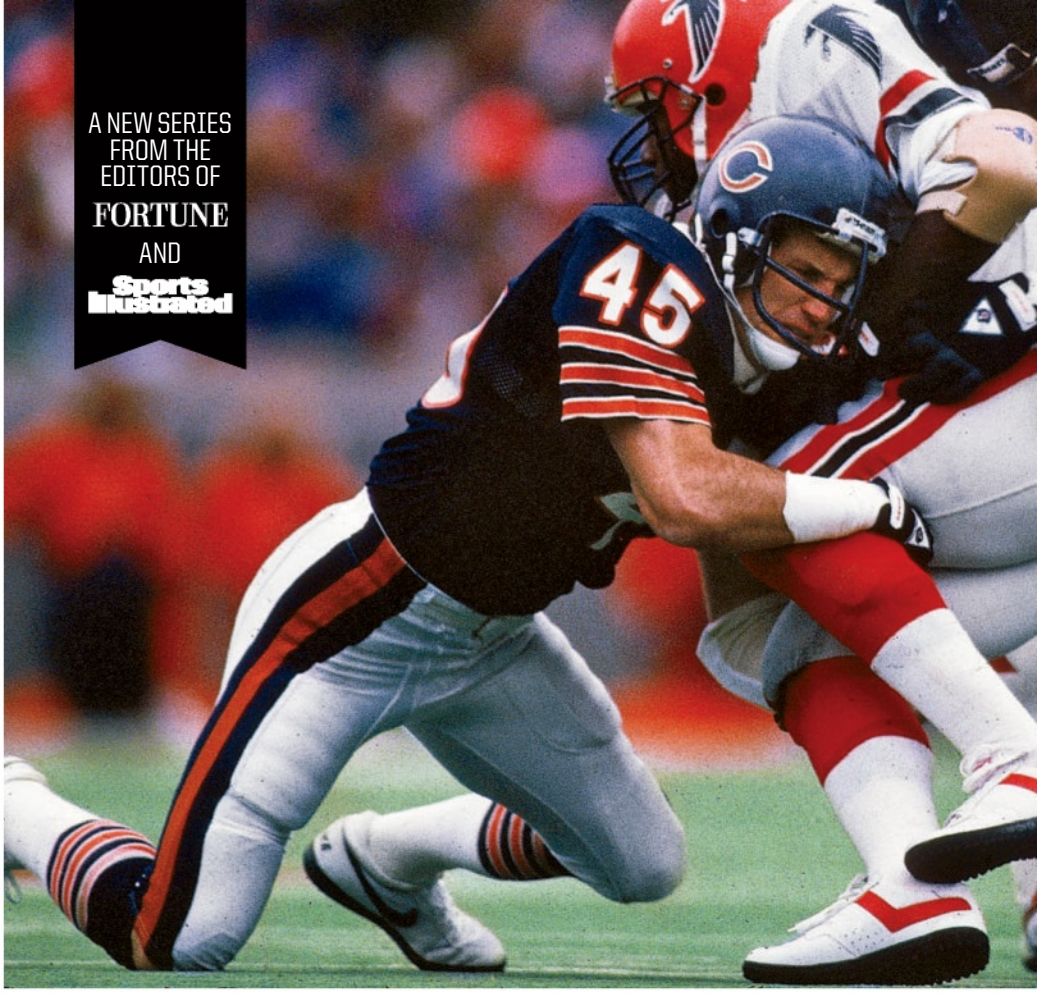
A NEW SERIES FROM THE EDITORS OF FORTUNE AND Sports Illustrated

PRO-FILES
+

Bear Market

Former All-Pro safety Gary Fencik is now a star in the financial world

BY RICH COHEN



Clutch Hitter Fencik (45) was a vital part of the dominant defense that led Chicago to the 1985 NFL title.

JOHN BIEVER/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

WHEN A CHILD interviews for admission to a private nursery school, what the administrator looks for is the ability to transition. It's less "Does she discern Beethoven from Brahms?" than "Can the kid move, without too much complaining, from story time to blocks?"

Transitions. That's all life is, and it's tougher than physics. From school to work to retirement to dead. For a professional athlete who wants to have a good existence as opposed to merely a good playing career, the toughest transition is often the shift from the last season of competition to the first year of work. He's like the mobster giving up the life for witness protection, or the acrobat quitting the circus to sell insurance.

"I still have fun, but nothing will ever replace the excitement of football," says Gary Fencik, aka the Hit Man, who spent 12 seasons roaming the secondary for the Bears, including an All-Pro campaign in 1981. "You always miss the immediacy and clarity of the game. You go to work on Sunday, and three hours later, someone has won and someone has lost. There are no postponed meetings, no wait-and-sees. It's happened, and either you were good enough or not. And everybody knows it."

If you want to understand the art of transition, you can do worse than to study the Hit Man. After his playing days ended in 1987—Fencik is the Bears' alltime interception leader and played free safety with a wild, attacking style that is still talked about in Chicago—he spent some time selling commercial real estate and also worked as a broadcaster, first on CBS in '88 and then, from '90 to '93, on the Bears' radio broadcasts. He started at Wells Fargo in '92, and since '95 he has worked at Adams Street Partners—a Chicago firm that specializes in the type of trading that measures returns in billions—where he is currently a partner and head of business development. Every time I talk to Fencik, I ask him to explain this gig, as I find the barrage of terms as pleasantly confusing as the details of Buddy Ryan's 46 defense. In my mind Fencik, as he speaks, morphs from a handsome defensive back covered in grime to a charming, 60-year-old executive. "We're a private equity manager and manage primarily pension-fund money, worldwide, and have different products or strategies we offer different types of clients, depending on what they're trying to invest in," he tells me. "Some clients may want exposure to our venture fund, [while] some may say, 'Look, I just want a broad exposure to private equity,' so they go into a product we call a fund of funds, and we invest in venture and buyout groups and create a diversified portfolio for them."

From a certain point of view Fencik's football career was just

Go to **si.com/pro-files** *to view videos of former athletes such as Gary Fencik who are succeeding off the field.*

an interruption, a daydream on the way to the office. Coming out of Yale, where he played split end and majored in history, in 1976, he was drafted by the Dolphins in the 10th round. After being Miami's last cut that September, he went home to see his parents—he grew up in Barrington, a Chicago suburb where his father was a high school assistant principal—before he was to start in the junior banker program at Citibank. But the Bears called and asked Fencik if he wanted to come to Lake Forest, site of the team's practice facility, to try out.

Even when he made the team, Fencik continued to consider the life he would lead after the game. "One of the benefits of going to Yale is the example of the people around you," said Fencik. "My roommate was going to business school, my teammates were going to med school, law school, so I never stopped thinking about what I was going to do after."

Yet for Fencik, the future remained stubbornly unreal. That changed in 1979 as a result of a series of minor disasters. He broke his arm in Week 1, and later he tore up his knee and shredded his ankle. "Everything bad happened on the left side of my body," he says. He had surgery on the latter two injuries and was suddenly made aware of his mortality. Around this time Bob Huff, an old friend and business mentor, called. He said to Fencik, **"Gary, I know this isn't a good moment, but you need to start thinking about what happens later."**

In 1981, Fencik enrolled at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Four years later, as the Bears made their run to a championship under coach Mike Ditka, he spent two nights a week studying finance. Says Fencik, "Eighty-five was good. I completed my M.B.A., we won the Super Bowl and I met my wife." He and Sandy live in Chicago; they have two children, a son and a daughter, both in college.

I asked Fencik why so many athletes have trouble transitioning from the field to the office cube. "I can't speak about every profession, but when it comes to finance, there is a period of time when you are supposed to be paying your dues," he tells me. "Most people do that in their 20s. If you've played 10 seasons of pro sports, you're going to be doing it in your 30s or 40s, which is tough and lonely."

Of course, many current players retire with the sort of cushion unknown to even the stars of Fencik's era. His NFL locker rooms were filled with guys working in the off-season to make the mortgage.

38

Interceptions for Fencik, the most in Bears history

$25 BILLION

Amount managed yearly by Adams Street Partners for its institutional clients

While it seems unfair—what would a player like Fencik make today?—it was lucky, too. Needing to work, as Fencik did, meant having to reinvent yourself to survive.

When I asked Fencik if football prepared him for this other life, he says, "I go to meetings where they talk about goal orientation, teamwork, holding people accountable, and I laugh because it's like I'm back in football. These things do translate. It's about building a culture. And for me, having played 12 years for the Bears, starting with teams that were not so good and watching as the environment was remade and we climbed until we reached the Super Bowl, you learned the importance of attitude."

Fencik paused, then said, "You know, when they were designing our Super Bowl rings, Ditka said he wanted two words on them: TEAM and ATTITUDE."

But for Fencik, the greatest lesson came not from succeeding but from coming up short, as when he was cut by the Dolphins. In this, football really does work as a metaphor for life. "At one time or another most of us who played in the NFL were the best player on a team," he tells me. "Then one day, unless you're a freak of nature like LeBron James or Walter Payton, you are no longer the best. It doesn't mean you can't be great. It just means you are going to have to study and work and figure out how to play better than you are. Some guys can never do it, and they're gone. The others realize the same thing: As you get older, you have to learn how to be yourself all over again." □

MEGAN BEARDER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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Summer of (Kevin) Love

Labor Day signals the unofficial end of summer—and of sports' supposed slow season. These five athletes each had a few months to remember, if not always for the sunniest of reasons

RORY MCILROY

He broke off his engagement to another world-class star—tennis player Caroline Wozniacki—on May 21 but still had the summer of his life. Since that announcement, the world's No. 1–ranked golfer has won four events, including the British Open and the PGA Championship.

MIKE TROUT

He hasn't been superhuman—his batting average is down to .288—but he has been superb. He is second in the American League in WAR, he won the All-Star Game MVP, and Google briefly thought he'd already won the AL MVP. He's also helped the Angels (last postseason: 2009) get into playoff position.

LEBRON JAMES

Losing the NBA Finals was a bummer—and so was the Twitter beating he took for suffering the cramps heard 'round the world—but King James restored his mojo with his July 11 decision to take his talents back to Cleveland. Now, about that 50-year championship drought the city is stuck in. . . .

JOHNNY MANZIEL

Johnny Football's defense of his robust social life raised eyebrows, and then his famous fingers got him in trouble when he flipped off the Redskins during a preseason game on Aug. 18, earning him a $12,000 fine. Oh, and he failed to win the starting quarterback job for the Browns.

PAUL GEORGE

The Pacers' swingman was poised to make this the Summer of George by becoming one of the breakout stars for Team USA at the FIBA World Cup. Instead the 24-year-old broke his leg in gruesome fashion during an intrasquad scrimmage on Aug. 1 and will likely miss all of next season.

THOMAS LOVELOCK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MCILROY); ROBER BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TROUT); TY WRIGHT/GETTY IMAGES (JAMES); AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MANZIEL); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (GEORGE); GREG FIUME/GETTY IMAGES (NATIONALS); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (BRADFORD); COURTESY DELAWARE NORTH (KIELBASA)

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Packers are selling **a 22-inch kielbasa smothered in beer cheese and sauerkraut** called the Horse Collar at Lambeau Field this season.

BREAKOUT PERFORMER

HOT

The Nats

A 10-game winning streak included five walk-offs and pushed their NL East lead to 7½ games. Who says you can't get anything done in D.C.?

Pat Neshek

Cards' reliever gave newcomer John Lackey jersey 41 and in return got a ball signed by the Bambino. The blouse that Ruth bought.

The Rattlers

Arizona won its third straight ArenaBowl, beating Cleveland 72–32. They're hot, but it's a dry heat.

Sean Foley

After four years, Tiger finally made a major cut: He axed his swing coach.

Sam Bradford

Practice makes perfect. The Rams' QB has "trips left, Y go, left ACL tear" down pat.

NOT

Sports Illustrated
HIGH SCHOOL
ATHLETE OF THE MONTH

Presented by
THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

Nominate Now

Since our inception 60 years ago, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED has recognized the best up-and-coming amateur athletes from around the country. Now we are introducing the SI High School Athlete of the Month award, presented by the U.S. Marine Corps, which will acknowledge not only students' athletic achievements but also the sort of exceptional character traits—perseverance, integrity, academic success, selflessness, sportsmanship—that make them leaders on the field and in their communities. In June we will choose the SI High School Athlete of the Year from among the monthly winners and other candidates. Do you know an accomplished student-athlete whose impact goes far beyond the scoreboard? Let us know why he or she should be recognized in SI and on SI.com during the coming school year. **Nominations are open at SI.com/HSathlete**

Ashanae McLaughlin | *Bronx, N.Y.* | *Basketball*

Ashanae, a 5' 8" senior point guard at Murry Bergtraum High, scored 15 points to lead her AAU team, the Lady Gauchos, to their second straight West 4th Street Tournament high school title, with a 67–55 win over the Westchester Hoopers. She was named game MVP. Ashanae averaged 16.8 points, 5.3 boards and 3.4 assists for Bergtraum last year.

Jordan Windle | *Morrisville, N.C.* | *Diving*

Jordan, a sophomore at International Connections Academy online school, won the men's 10-meter title at the national championships in Knoxville, Tenn., scoring 527.80 points to win by 84.90. A week earlier he took four golds and one silver at junior nationals. Jordan will compete for the U.S. at the world juniors in Russia in September.

Brisa Hennessy | *Kailua, Hawaii* | *Surfing*

Brisa, 14, a freshman at Hawaii Technology Academy, won the all-ages Explorer women's category—and the 14-and-under girls' open and Explorer girls' divisions—at the National Scholastic Surfing Association championships in Huntington Beach, Calif. In June, Brisa won the girls' 18-and-under title at the U.S. championships.

Faces in the Crowd

→ | *Edited by* ALEXANDRA FENWICK

Sam Burns | *Shreveport, La.* | *Golf*

Sam, a senior at Calvary Baptist Academy, shot a 10-under 274 to win the 39th annual Junior PGA Championship boys' title by two strokes at the Miramont Country Club in Bryan, Texas. In June he won the AJGA Rolex Tournament of Champions. The nation's top junior in the AJGA rankings, Sam has verbally committed to LSU.

Sarah Killion | *Fort Wayne, Ind.* | *Soccer*

Killion, a senior midfielder at UCLA and a member of the U.S. under-23 squad, had a goal and two assists to lead the L.A. Blues to a 6–1 victory over the Washington Spirit for the W-League championship. The pro-am organization is the oldest women's league in North America. Last season Killion helped the Bruins win their first NCAA title.

Josh Zuchowski | *Jupiter, Fla.* | *Swimming*

Josh, a homeschooled fifth-grader who competes for the Jupiter Dragons, won the boys' 10-and-under high-point award at the long course Florida Gold Coast Junior Olympics. He took eight gold medals and a silver and broke a Gold Coast age-group record with a 1:12.17 in the 100-meter backstroke, the top age-group time in the country this year.

COURTESY OF ASHANAE MCLAUGHLIN (MCLAUGHLIN); USA DIVING (WINDLE); COURTESY OF THE HENNESSY FAMILY (HENNESSY); MONTANA PRITCHARD/THE PGA OF AMERICA (BURNS); DON LIEBIG/ASUCLA (KILLION); LINDSAY ZUCHOWSKI (ZUCHOWSKI)

Nominate Now ▼

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For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

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Das Auto.

Just My Type

→ *Interview by* **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *What's your favorite football team?*
STEPHEN CURRY: My hometown team, the Carolina Panthers.
DP: *Did you play football?*
SC: Peewee until I was 11.
DP: *Did Mom say no more?*
SC: No. I played running back. On my team there was this top-tier linebacker, and he didn't take it easy when I came through the middle one practice. That was all I needed.
DP: *Make a great football team out of NBA players. Who's your quarterback?*
SC: I put myself there. I have a decent arm, decent aim.
DP: *Are you like Cam Newton?*
SC: I could get out of the pocket, but if I have enough talented athletes out there, I like to stay in and throw it.
DP: *Who's your running back?*
SC: Nate Robinson.
DP: *Tight end?*
SC: LeBron.
DP: *Wide receiver?*
SC: I like Kevin Durant. Especially [in the] red zone, throw it up on the corner.
DP: *Did you talk to your backcourt mate Klay Thompson when he was part of the Kevin Love trade rumors?*
SC: A few times, just to see where his head was at. He took it well. He's pretty happy with how things turned out.
DP: *Did management consult you?*
SC: Yeah, they asked my opinion. Obviously, Kevin Love is a great power forward. But would it make us better as a team?
DP: *Would you have done the trade?*
SC: I don't think you can give up Klay.
DP: *You wouldn't trade Thompson for Love?*
SC: We have such a great core. Put the same core together for another year, we gotta get better.
DP: *Who's a better offensive player, you or LeBron?*
SC: That's the first time I've ever been asked that question. . . . Me. It's gotta be, right?
DP: *LeBron is a better scorer, but you're a better shooter. How's that?*
SC: I don't know. He demands a lot of attention on the floor. But I like to say I can distribute and be a playmaker as well.
DP: *Was there any thought of not playing for Team USA after Paul George broke his leg?*
SC: It shook us up so bad, you wanted to regroup. At the end of the day, it's an opportunity to represent your country and win gold. I want to be a part of that.
DP: *If you owned the Warriors, would you let you play?*
SC: They're very supportive of me. It's kind of my call.
DP: *I wouldn't want you to.*
SC: I'm sure if I said, I'll do whatever you guys want to do, they'd say [don't play]. But that's not the case. □

STEPHEN CURRY

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

The Warriors' star doesn't play down his skills—and why should he after averaging 24.0 points and 8.5 assists last season? He's on his way to Spain to play for Team USA at the FIBA World Cup.

Guest Shots

Say What?

Ravens quarterback **Joe Flacco** was intrigued by my suggestion that he form a Boring QBs Club with Eli Manning, Andy Dalton and Nick Foles. "I wouldn't mind that," Flacco told me. "There would be a lot of silence before we all opened up." . . . NFL officiating chief **Dean Blandino**

said fans shouldn't be worried about the high volume of preseason flags: "I'm very confident that the teams will adjust, and when the regular season rolls around, I really don't feel like we're going to have 25 to 30 fouls per game." . . . **Dale Earnhardt Jr.**

talked about persevering through tough times earlier in his NASCAR career. "If I would have quit, it would have probably been after my dad was killed in Daytona," Earnhardt said. "But that wasn't ever an option, even when we weren't running good in 2009–10. I would have regretted that the rest of my life."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CURRY); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FLACCO); JOHN RAOUX/AP (BLANDINO); JONATHAN FERREY/GETTY IMAGES (EARNHARDT)

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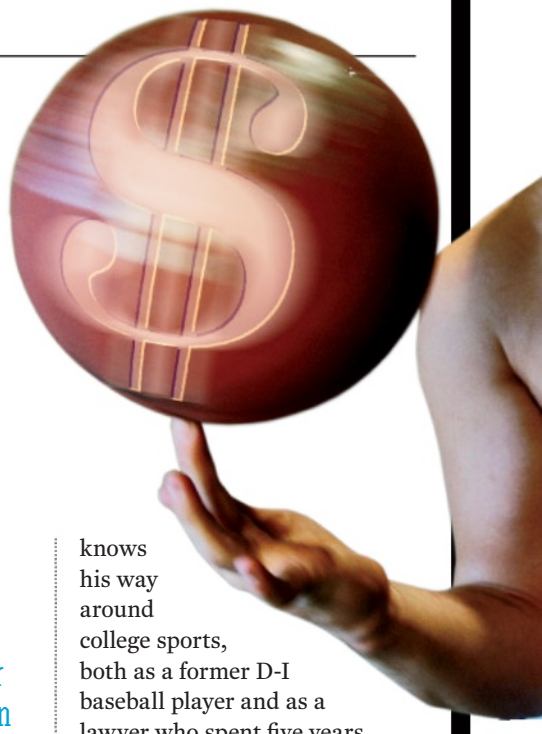
The Case for . . .

The Big Lawsuit

BY BOB LITAN AND L. JON WERTHEIM



THESE ARE uncertain days for the NCAA, from the unannounced vote by Northwestern football players to unionize to the Aug. 8 federal court ruling stating that players have a right to be compensated for their names, images and likenesses. Nothing, however, looms as large as a likely federal court showdown in the fall of 2015 in New Jersey. Last March, a suit was filed on behalf of all Division I basketball and football players against the NCAA and the five most powerful conferences, effectively challenging their claim of amateurism.

"This," says a Pac-12 athletic director, "could be the big one."

The lead plaintiff is Clemson cornerback Martin Jenkins. Certainly he doesn't have the wattage of Ed O'Bannon, the former UCLA basketball star and NBA forward who headlined the landmark lawsuit that was decided last month. But what has raised the stakes and rattled the NCAA pooh-bahs in this antitrust case is the name of the plaintiffs' chief attorney, Jeffrey Kessler.

Kessler has been fighting sports leagues since the 1970s. He helped bring about NFL free agency in 1992, and as outside counsel to the NBA players' association, he has figured prominently in each of the league's labor fights over the past two decades.

In an interview with SI last month, Kessler said it is both "grossly unjust" and "illegal" for the NCAA member schools to generate hundreds of millions of dollars in the two main revenue sports without at least giving individual schools the opportunity to decide whether to share some of that money with the athletes. On the same day the O'Bannon decision was announced, the NCAA granted the schools of the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12 and SEC the right to decide how much, if at all, of a stipend to offer student-athletes, but Kessler doesn't think that goes far enough.

The theory behind the Kessler case is that the restriction against paying athletes is a naked restraint of trade without an offsetting justification strong enough to support it. The lawsuit seeks an outcome that would likely rock the foundations of college sports: an absence of restraint from competition. In short, Kessler wants a truly open market, meaning that high school athletes could field offers and sign with the highest bidder.

Before filing the suit last October, Kessler's firm made a potentially crucial hire, bringing aboard Tim Nevius. He knows his way around college sports, both as a former D-I baseball player and as a lawyer who spent five years in the enforcement division of the NCAA.

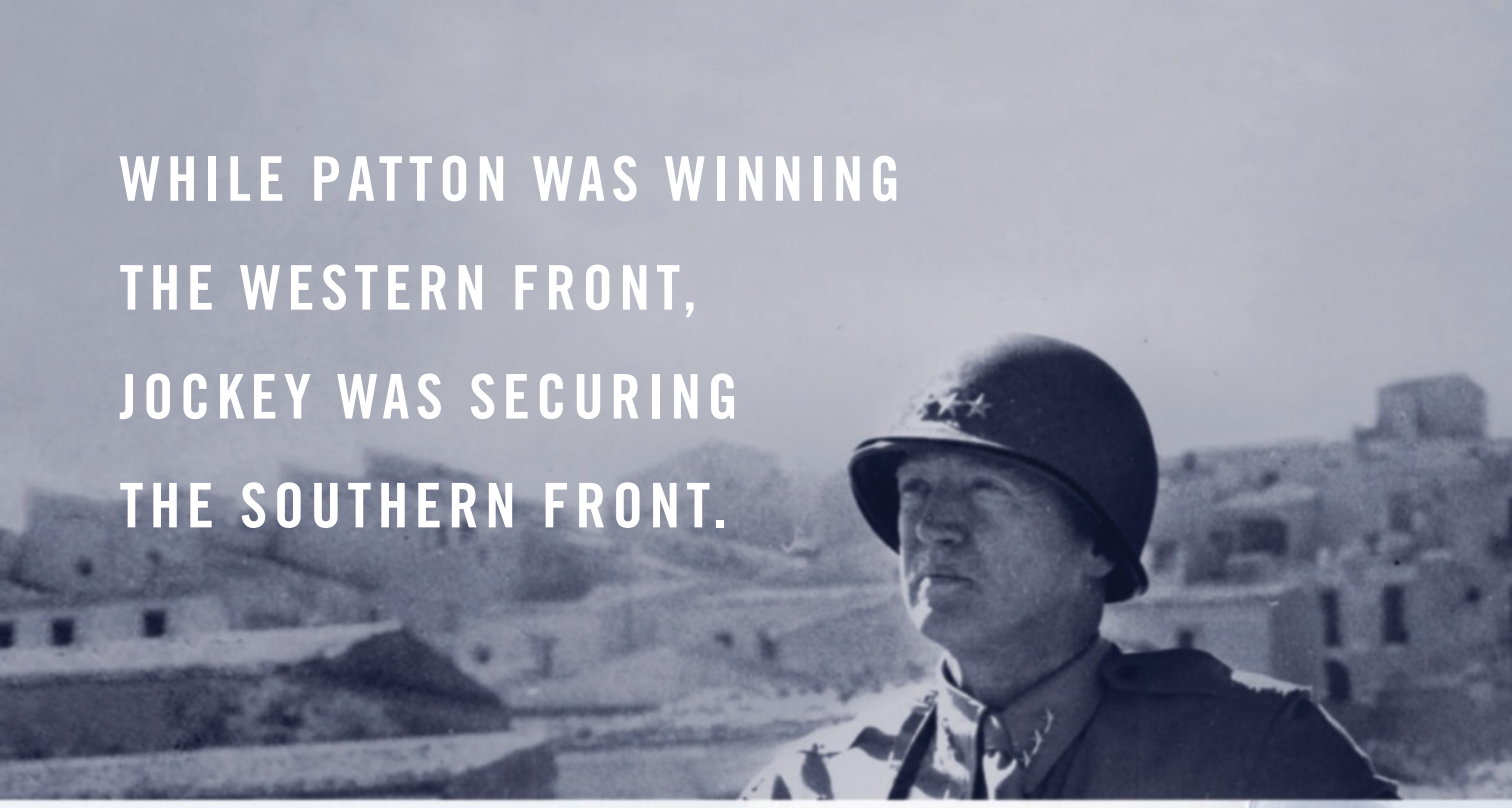
Jeffrey Kessler seeks an outcome that would likely rock the foundations of college sports: **an absence of restraint from competition.**

The defendants will be filing a motion to dismiss shortly. That's a standard move that is unlikely to prevail given the O'Bannon verdict, which was issued by U.S. chief district judge Claudia Wilken, who will oversee the preliminary legal skirmishing in Kessler's case. Then, assuming it is not dismissed or settled, the case will be tried before Judge Freda Wolfson in New Jersey.

Chastened by the O'Bannon ruling, the NCAA is considering asking Congress for an exemption from the antitrust laws, much as the NFL and Major League Baseball enjoy—though, in the case of the latter, it was bestowed by the Supreme Court. Kessler is not worried. "It's difficult for Congress to agree on anything these days," he says. "But Democrats and Republicans can certainly agree that any system under which a coach can make $6 million, an athletic director $2 million and the athletes can't get [cab] fare is not likely to attract a groundswell of support." □

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SI PREMEDIA; PHOTO BY DAVID WALDORF/GETTY IMAGES

WHILE PATTON WAS WINNING THE WESTERN FRONT, JOCKEY WAS SECURING THE SOUTHERN FRONT.



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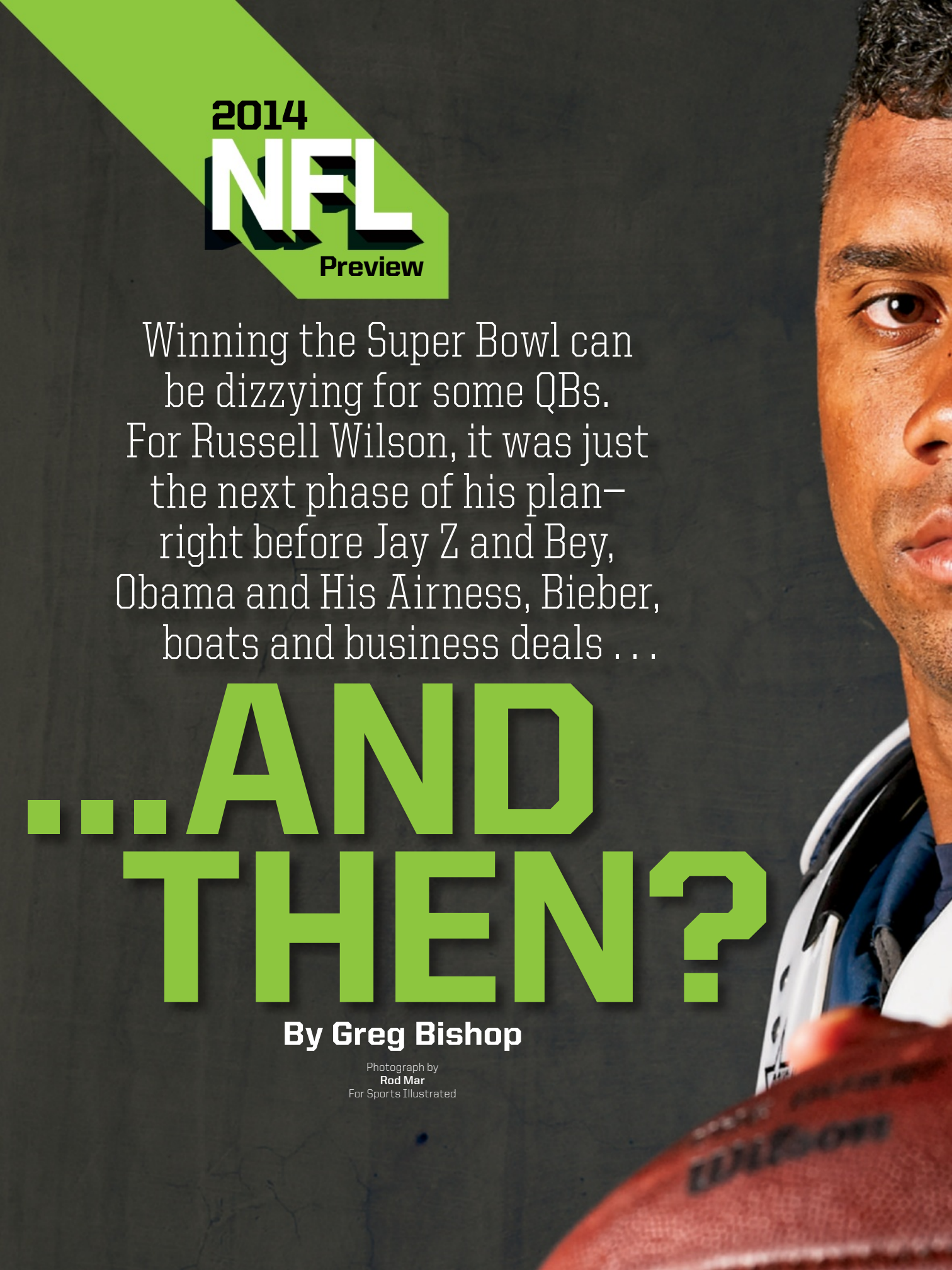
2014 NFL Preview

Winning the Super Bowl can be dizzying for some QBs. For Russell Wilson, it was just the next phase of his plan—right before Jay Z and Bey, Obama and His Airness, Bieber, boats and business deals . . .

. . . AND THEN?

By Greg Bishop

Photograph by
Rod Mar
For Sports Illustrated



DOUGLAS
NFL

WILDEST DREAMS
Wilson can envision a baseball future at Safeco after hoisting the Lombardi Trophy, meeting the President and working out with the Rangers.

High above Safeco Field, inside Suite 49, Russell Wilson starts to relax. Then he thinks of something. Another idea.

He wants to play baseball again.

The Seahawks' quarterback has a million ideas, not all of them good. They come to him in the morning and at practice and in the middle of the night. He'll text his coach at 2 a.m. Or his agent. Or his friends. *We should try this.* . . . Some ideas, such as those about endorsements, get executed. Others, like the Wilson-themed store that he wanted to call The Danger Zone—after his nickname, DangeRuss Wilson—do not.

At Safeco, Wilson bounces out of his seat, inspired. He looks down on the field and sees Felix Hernandez, the Mariners' ace, a fellow icon in Seattle. He sees All-Star second baseman Robinson Cano, who plays one of Wilson's old positions. He sees pitcher Jeff Samardzija, who could have pursued America's fall or summer pastimes out of Notre Dame. They have Wilson thinking about the minor league career he gave up two years ago. Of course he could reach the majors, Wilson says. All he needs is a few hundred at bats to work out the kinks. That, and a football team crazy enough to let him moonlight on a diamond.

The natural reaction to such grand pronouncements is *Yeah, right.* But few people ever imagined that the 5' 11" Wilson, a third-round pick, would start immediately in the NFL, and that worked out just as he expected. In 2012 he seized the starting job out of Wisconsin. Then he won 24 games his first two seasons and led a 43–8 demolition of the Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII to cap off year two—shifting the focus from what he lacked (height, experience) to the #FirstChampionshipProblems that he confronted this off-season. Namely, how someone who built a career on overcoming doubts can continue to succeed when no one doubts him anymore. That and one glaring rest-of-the-world problem: his divorce.

So maybe he'll go all Michael Jordan. Win three Super Bowls, play baseball, then come back and win three more. That's the sort of thought Wilson expresses in moments of spontaneity, rare as they are, when he isn't on message to the point of seeming programmed, when he isn't, as teammates call him, The Robot.

"I don't have everything I wanted," he says. "I'm far from that. I keep searching. Is that sick? Is that weird? I don't know. But I'm not satisfied with last year's results."

Really? The sentiment is both commendable and laughable. Wilson just reached the football pinnacle at 25, and the proof is on his left hand, filled with diamonds the size of Fruity Pebbles.

At Safeco, Wilson is surrounded by buddies—his best friend since kindergarten, Scott Pickett; his operations manager, Matt Rodgers; and a bevy of employees from his football camps. There's an *Entourage* feeling to the evening, a young star and his amigos at the ballpark, everyone but Wilson with beers in hand and stubble on their faces, life damn near perfect, the possibilities endless. *Entourage*, it turns out, is Wilson's favorite show; he has a cameo in the upcoming movie.

The show, as Wilson's generation remembers, was about an actor and his friends and their plans to rule the world. Wilson is asked which character he identifies with. "Vince," he says, obviously. The star.

But he wants to clarify because Wilson is nothing if not obsessively precise. Vince went off the rails near the end, found himself in rehab for cocaine abuse. His career was anything but smooth. "The *good* Vince, though," Wilson says.

This is what it's like to be Russell Wilson: When he arrives to shoot a Bose commercial at CenturyLink Field, he does not park outside with the masses; he parks his black Mercedes inside the concourse. He relieves running back Marshawn Lynch of a packet of Skittles, hidden inside Lynch's locker. He eats sushi in the coaches' room, where outside food is banned. He gets introduced along the way to not one young blonde admirer, but four.

ROD MAR FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

DAVID BERGMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TROPHY); GEOFF BURKE/USA TODAY SPORTS (WITH OBAMA); BRAD MANGIN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WITH RANGERS)

For Wilson, this is any random Tuesday, his new life and all its perks. When Seahawks superfan John Nordstrom—yes, *that* Nordstrom—heard that Wilson did not own a boat, he loaned him one, indefinitely. When Wilson bought 38 sets of drapes for his new home, the company waived the installation fees.

Wilson lives life from hashtag to hashtag, every movement accompanied on social media by inspirational quotes and Bible verses and slogans, and one of his favorites remains #NoTime2Sleep. He won the Super Bowl and did not take vacation. Instead, from early February to late July, almost six months of bucket-list insanity unfolded.

Wilson got schooled on the evolution of black quarterbacks by Barack Obama, and he quizzed Jordan on the art of repeating. He bowled with Justin Bieber, sat courtside with Jay Z and Beyoncé, and hung with Macklemore, the Seattle rapper he calls Ben.

He filmed commercials for American Family Insurance, Alaska Airlines, Bose, Braun, Duracell, Microsoft and the United Way. On the *Entourage* set, 300 models surrounded him at a pool party. And between takes he tossed passes to actors Kevin Connolly and Jerry Ferrara. (On one route Connolly planted, cut and broke his leg in two spots.)

Wilson went so many places—Surprise, Ariz., for spring training with the Rangers; Raleigh, where his first school, N.C. State, retired his jersey—that he required a stunt double for commercial shoots. That double will earn six figures this year, just from his work as Wilson's doppelgänger.

Wilson went so many places that he required a stunt double for commercials. That double will earn six figures this year, just from his work as Wilson's doppelgänger.

And he trained. Every day. First thing in the morning. Often again at night. He incorporated soccer into his workouts because Wes Welker said it had helped him with spatial awareness, which might prove beneficial when reading zone coverages. He swam laps for cardio and took up paddleboarding for core work.

It could all seem like a little much. Except to Wilson.

On the Bose set, in the shadow of CenturyLink, Wilson notices an apartment complex rising in the distance. Bored between takes, he decides to look into available units with views of the field, and so he calls the leasing office: "Hey, Tanya, this is Russell Wilson. . . ."

She has no idea that this Russell Wilson is the one who spends his Sundays on the field out the window, and so she asks for his contact info and his price range. Wilson is due $662,434 in base salary this season. But his endorsement income more than doubles that.

Tanya: "Is there a budget you want to stay under?"

Wilson: "Do you have a penthouse unit?"

Tanya: "What's your timetable?"

Wilson: "What's the most expensive one you have available?"

The Super Bowl expanded both Wilson's world and his outsized confidence, which he mostly keeps under wraps. He's the guy who, in his first huddle, at his first practice, said to his veteran teammates. "Hey, big touchdown, big play."

"I'm looking at him like, Hey, rookie, this is practice," left tackle Russell Okung recalls.

The week before the Super Bowl, in East Rutherford, N.J., Wilson answered endless questions about his Hall of Fame–bound counterpart, Peyton Manning. Wilson was deferential—at least in public. The night before the game he stood before his teammates in a hotel ballroom. He reminded them they were

there for a reason, that he expected to win, and by double digits.

Later, on the bus ride to MetLife Stadium, Wilson texted his agent, Mark Rodgers (Matt's father), "There's no doubt we're going to win." While teammates blared hip-hop and hard rock through their headphones, Wilson dialed up "I'm Gonna be Ready," a ballad by gospel singer Yolanda Adams—basically the opposite of what you'd imagine any athlete would listen to before the Super Bowl, all soft and silky, the tempo slow.

But it soothed him. "I remember that," Wilson says. "How calm I was. How ready I was. I've never been that calm before."

Because Wilson recites Bible verses and visits sick children and presents an image that can appear crafted for consumption, it's easy to forget there is a ferocious athlete underneath. But there is. The guy who told Seahawks GM John Schneider on draft day, "This is the best decision you've made in your life," is the same guy who outplayed Manning, completing 18 of 25 passes for 206 yards and two TDs.

The thing is, Wilson expected as much—not just before that game but before he even reached the NFL. He reiterates that on the July day that Germany wallops Brazil 7–1 in the World Cup. Does it remind him of the Super Bowl? He nods. "One team was clearly better than the other," he says, a rare lapse into candor.

On the field, after the Super Bowl, Wilson ran into Schneider. "This is so special," he said. "I can't wait until next year." At the team party Wilson watched his friend Ben perform, then retired to a separate ballroom with his inner circle. The Robot celebrated. Sort of.

"In some ways it was just another day," Mark Rodgers says. "I don't know if I was troubled that he wasn't more excited, or impressed."

Says Wilson's agent of the QB after the Super Bowl victory, "I don't know if I was troubled that he wasn't more excited, or impressed."

When Andre Agassi proclaimed, "Image is everything," the one he projected was antiestablishment. Wilson believes the same thing but chooses the opposite facade. He does not just send handwritten notes (to sick children, coaching staff, his agent), he practices calligraphy and makes drafts before putting pen to personal stationery. He keeps three suits in his car, including a Calvin Klein tuxedo, just in case. He swaps his iPhone out for a Windows model at Microsoft events. When the Seahawks blast the Eminem song "The Monster," which mentions Wilson's name, he makes sure to be talking with the nearest receiver during practice so that no one thinks he's waiting to hear it.

He wants to be The Perfect Teammate, The Perfect Pitchman, The Perfect Son—and in striving for perfection, he can appear to try too hard, the kid who practiced press conferences growing up. Wilson's agent called Rosetta Stone this offseason so that his client could learn another language during his downtime, driving around town. Only Wilson didn't want to learn just one language, he wanted to learn *three*.

Wilson sidesteps questions about Washington State's legalization of marijuana, or about Lynch's posing nude for a magazine, or about life after divorce. Pickett, his best friend, declines to share his favorite Wilson stories. "He's not going to want to talk about them," Pickett says. "They're in the past."

Instead, Wilson steers conversations to his plan to stop by CenturyLink every day before the season starts. Or how he has the birthday of every Seahawks employee programmed into his phone.

ALLEN BEREZOVSKY/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (WITH ALBAY; ROD MAR FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (COMMERCIAL); JOHN PAUL FILO/CBS/LANDOV (WITH LETTERMAN)

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

He's shared one goal for 2014: He wants to serve someone every day, by bringing a rookie a cup of water or shaking the hand of everyone on a commercial shoot. The desired reaction: *Well, isn't that nice.*

"Andrew Luck had that kind of polish," says Seahawks teammate Richard Sherman, who played with Luck at Stanford. "The difference is, Russell is stone. He's totally unflustered, unfazed by anything. He has such a Zen that you can feel it."

At another July commercial shoot, for Braun, Wilson is more than the star. He's the director, in a sense, offering suggestions and reviewing playbacks between takes. He fusses with his faux-hawk after visiting hair and makeup. He fishes the tuxedo out of his car to replace the suit that wardrobe selected. And he handles the music on set, all his favorites—Jay Z, Earth Wind & Fire, Michael Jackson. (To spend time with Wilson is to enter a "Thriller"/"Beat It"/"Man in the Mirror" torture chamber.)

Wilson's the same way about his football camps. While most players do just one, in their hometown, Wilson did eight this summer, including in Richmond (his hometown), Los Angeles, Raleigh, Vancouver and Madison, Wis. His have VIP and merchandise tents as well as a sound booth, and when called upon, during an ESPN interview, he pivots gracefully to invoke camp sponsor Gatorade and its Beat the Heat campaign, making sure that nearby campers are in the shot.

At each camp Wilson signs every T-shirt pressed his way and takes photos with every last child and volunteer coach. He holds a baby. "Russell for president!" someone shouts from the crowd.

"Just call me FDR," he says, smiling.

Wilson's self-possession and self-assurance bring to mind a couple of shortstops when they were his age: Alex Rodriguez (a comparison raised by Wilson's agent, Mark Rodgers, who courted A-Rod as a teenage sensation in Miami) and Derek Jeter (Wilson's own choice). Those two reside at opposite ends of the image spectrum. While it seems safe to say that Wilson will never be as polarizing as Rodriguez, it's far from certain that his practiced style will wear as well as Jeter's.

But he's trying; that's the goal. At one of his camps Wilson moves several teammates into position, coaching them on how to coach the kids. They watch as their quarterback signs autographs and takes pictures and works the grounds, his actions precise, the smallest details taken care of. "He's smooth," linebacker Bobby Wagner says. "He's not like a 25-year-old. He's refined. He's like an older guy. He's just . . . old."

Cameras roll on a United Way commercial set as a group of child actors pick teams. Wilson stands there, alone in a park. In this satire he is the last taken, an underdog again. The teams move to a miniature obstacle course on a nearby field, and for perhaps the first time ever Wilson is too tall.

New paradigm indeed.

Wilson has lost three times, at anything, since last Oct. 7. His Seahawks stumbled twice in December, to the 49ers and to the Cardinals, by a combined nine points. And, to his eternal embarrassment, he dropped a pickup basketball game 15–11 against his teenage sister, Anna. He's no longer too short, or not good enough. He's the guy onstage with Jessica Alba at the ESPY Awards. It's hard these days to question his approach.

"Maybe he went overboard in the beginning," says Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon, a mentor to Wilson and a Seahawks TV analyst. "Maybe he alienated teammates as a rookie. Now, you can't argue with the results. He's the guy who has it all, who always seems to do the right thing. That's what surprised me so much about his marriage not working out. That shocked me."

Ah, the divorce. Wilson married his high school sweetheart, Ashton Meem, in 2012. The two often appeared together in public and, Moon says, Ashton regularly watched Seattle's practices, making her more visible than the other wives.

According to friends, the Wilsons were in marital counseling for much of last season. And, despite how well Wilson played in the final months, those same friends say that he struggled to reconcile his crumbling marriage with his Christian faith. He believed divorce was a sin.

As Wilson made the post–Super Bowl rounds—*Letterman, Charlie Rose, Good Morning America*—Ashton accompanied him. But they separated less than a month later, and in April, Wilson filed for divorce, which he announced in a press release. And then he tabled the topic for good. The couple reached a settlement two days before the start of training camp.

Wilson can evade the d-word, but

+

PROGRAM CHECK

By picking apart Denver's D, Wilson played his way on to the ESPYs with Alba, a United Way ad and Letterman's couch.

he can't escape the subject. Everywhere he goes, well-intentioned Seahawks fans try to set him up, offering phone numbers for their daughters or nieces or colleagues. One camper, during a Q&A, asked Wilson if he was married. "Next question," he responded.

Back in the suite at Safeco the topic makes Wilson visibly uncomfortable. He fidgets and declines to answer. He glances at his assistant. After 30 seconds he regains composure and continues as if nothing has happened. "What else?" he says, back on point *that quick*.

If Wilson listed all of his post–Super Bowl responsibilities, the volume would overwhelm him. But it never does. He's all next play, next training session, next shoot, next celebrity hangout, a cliché—one fill-in-the-blank at a time—sprung to life. Wilson talks incessantly about it, this notion of compartmentalization. He says it's his greatest strength.

The key to that approach glows constantly on the background of his cellphone: BE PRESENT. Over lunch one day in July he asks about the most anticipated game of the NFL season: "When do we play Denver?" I know it's Week 3; the waiter knows it's Week 3; Wilson probably knows it's Week 3. But to admit that would be to cop to a view beyond the next 24 hours. That's not the Wilson way.

As everything around Wilson changed, he tried to remain as normal as a Super Bowl champion can be. He turned down dozens of book offers because he believes his story has just started. He moved two of his best friends from childhood into a house near his own and remained wary of new acquaintances, with all the business ventures they suggested. He told himself, I've only won one. I've never done anything. I'm only 25. That process, he says, "is almost like acting." The Robot believes he can program his mind to impact his future actions.

ROBOT UPRISING

One place no one questions Wilson's approach: on the field, where he set the record for most wins through two years.

Open the Google app and say, "**Ok Google**, what is the Sports Illustrated cover jinx?"

Those close to Wilson know that this all comes from his father, Harrison Wilson III, a lawyer who woke his son up every morning at 5:30 to run through drills; who planned his own funeral, including specific hymns and scriptures; who ingrained slogans that doubled as expectations, like "separation through preparation" and "there's a king in every crowd." Harrison and his wife, Tammy, a legal nurse consultant, put their three children through the Collegiate School (tuition: $17,000). Russell followed his father everywhere, including into football and baseball.

Harrison died in June 2010, at 55, of complications from diabetes, just one day after Russell was drafted by the Rockies. Russell remains his father's son, the ultimate micromanager. In a quiet moment at the Bose commercial he plays some Neil Young. *Old man, take a look at my life, I'm a lot like you were.*

The rest is reinforcement, repetition. Wilson works with Trevor Moawad, a mental coach whose own father, Bob, was a contributor to the original *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. As the season neared, Moawad sent Wilson video clips, stories, highlight montages. He told the QB the story of Buzz Aldrin, the astronaut who returned from space and struggled for years with how to top that moment. He sent one video in which Jordan discussed how he stayed on top once he arrived there, followed by clips of Wilson savaging NFL defenses. "Everything he does should be deliberate," Moawad says.

On another occasion he handed Wilson a T-shirt. It read, PISS EXCELLENCE.

Russell Wilson can see the future. Often he will play out specific plays, entire games, in his head while he showers or watches film. In the past he studied college football video games just so he could visualize opponents' stadiums—where they placed the video board, if they had a clock tower.

He sees the Seahawks opening up their offense this season, with a healthy Percy Harvin back at receiver, alongside speedy rookie Paul Richardson. He can picture the 2016 off-season, when it will be time to renegotiate his contract, and the payday that awaits, in the $20 million-a-year range. He calls these visions "conscious confidence," and he swears that specific plays he's dreamed up have actually unfolded on the field, which would make him both a Pro Bowler and a clairvoyant.

People don't understand Wilson, Sherman says. They miss what drives him, because what drives him is buried beneath five coats of polish. They're not so different, the cornerback who speaks before he thinks and the quarterback who overthinks every word. "We're fueled by the same thing," says Sherman. "Our whole team is. We're a bunch of underdogs, guys nobody wanted, who didn't fit schemes. That's why he's our leader."

The trick to another Super Bowl run, Moon says, is for Wilson to establish himself among his teammates as their leader; in charge but not above them; able to laugh at their jokes or join them for dinner; at once one of them and not. "Everything he went through could help with that," Moon says. "It almost makes him human." □

TED S. WARREN/AP

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NFL Preview

The 49ers' quarterback has made good sport out of confounding the public. There is no ambiguity, however, about his goals

COLIN KAEPERNICK HAS A CHECKLIST

By Michael Rosenberg

Photograph by
Robert Beck/Sports Illustrated

COLIN KAEPERNICK'S 2011 SEASON GOALS

1 Become the starter

Well, sure. Everybody wants to start. So what if he's just a rookie? His coach with the 49ers, Jim Harbaugh, asked Kaepernick to write down a few things he hoped to accomplish in his first season, and this is No. 1.

2 Lead the team to the playoffs

Awfully ambitious, don't you think? In the previous 60 years only nine rookie quarterbacks had taken a team to the postseason, and San Francisco had not been there in eight seasons. But there is something different about Kaepernick. It's hard to explain, but Jack Harbaugh sees it. He is Jim's dad, a retired coach, and the previous fall he sat in his house in Milwaukee, eyes on the TV, thinking, Dammit, I should go to bed, *but he was so mesmerized by this quarterback at Nevada that he stayed up long past midnight, watching him, week after week.*

Jim sees it too. When his dad told him he thought Kaepernick was the best quarterback in the draft, Jim said, "I think he's the best player *in the draft."*

3 Lead the team to a Super Bowl victory

Whoa. Really? A rookie quarterback has never won a Super Bowl, and in the summer of 2011, Kaepernick is not just a rookie. He is an injured rookie. Only a few people know that several months earlier he injured his left leg in a Nevada game. Bone bruises, he was told. So he played through the pain. After he was drafted, he had another X-ray, and doctors explained that every black dot on the film was a stress fracture. It was not hard to find the black dots.

"This thing was like a damn Dalmatian!" Kaepernick says now. "It was like cookies 'n' cream ice cream."

He had surgery during the NFL lockout, which is one reason he could keep it quiet. There were no practices or organized team activities to miss. When he finally began practicing, he had a rod in his left leg and an injury that wouldn't really heal for another year. Still, goals are goals. . . .

4 Dominate every game

Some men with stress fractures in their legs would not reach for the remote control without calling a doctor. Kaepernick is not some men. He went to the NFL combine, before knowing how badly his leg was injured, and ran the 40-yard dash in 4.53 seconds. That was faster than No. 1 overall pick Cam Newton and faster than Russell Wilson would run the next season, and you have to watch the NFL Network video really closely to see Kaepernick grimacing.

Everybody in the NFL examined workout numbers and game tape and stats leading up to the draft, and still the microscopes didn't find the real Kaepernick. He is carved out of equal parts nature and nurture, a walking sociological experiment: half-black, half-white, adopted in Wisconsin and raised in California, a sprinter in a weightlifter's body, with city style and small-town values. He has AGAINST ALL ODDS tattooed across his chest but has always expected to . . .

5 Become a "great"

Great, as in alltime great. *That's a heck of a statement from an injured rookie backup. Even Harbaugh thinks,* Seriously?

"He was like, 'I like your goals, but we're kind of looking for something that is realistic for right now,' " Kaepernick says.

He laughs. This doesn't mean it's funny to him. Kaepernick sat behind Alex Smith as a rookie. But the next year . . . well, damn if he didn't:

1) Become the starter
2) Lead the team to the playoffs
3) Almost lead the team to a Super Bowl victory

4) Nearly dominate every game

5) Make people wonder if he weren't already one of the greats

He almost went five for five.

But he didn't. Back to work.

Harbaugh says he has never met anybody who combines competitiveness and compassion like Kaepernick. Many hyperintense athletes are so focused on their own success that they don't show much regard for anybody else's. This is also hard to explain, but maybe this story helps.

Last January the 49ers lost to the Seahawks in the NFC championship game. It stung for too many reasons to count. Kaepernick's potential game-winning touchdown pass to Michael Crabtree was picked off by Richard Sherman. Seattle is San Francisco's biggest rival, and the idea of the Seahawks' winning the Super Bowl was downright sickening, but one of Kaepernick's best friends, Ricardo Lockette, is a wide receiver for the Seahawks. So afterward—around the time Sherman went on his famous postgame rant about Crabtree—Kaepernick found Lockette and said:

"Go get your ring."

A few days later one of his agents, Jason Bernstein, asked Kaepernick when he wanted to head to Miami to start training.

"February 2."

Bernstein thought for a moment. That's Super Bowl Sunday.

Morning flight, Colin?

"Evening."

He landed in Miami and moved into an apartment while the rest of the country watched Lockette and the Seahawks win the Super Bowl.

Colin Kaepernick doesn't fit into a convenient box. He kisses his biceps after scoring a touchdown but dislikes attention. He loves rap, listens to gospel on Sunday mornings and says grace before every meal. He dresses like an anti-authority figure but was a straight-A student who sat in the front row in high school. He is often curt in media sessions but is so polite in a one-on-one interview that his cheeseburger sits untouched for a half hour because he won't eat while he talks.

He says he's exactly where he always expected to be and also that he was fortunate to get here. Kids think Kaepernick is one of them. Eighty-year-old women adore him. Many NFL fans see his tattoos and flamboyant on-field play and think he is a punk.

Last June, a man arrived at the Kaepernicks' house in Modesto, Calif., and introduced himself as Colin's birth father. He is not, and the Kaepernicks obtained a restraining order against him. One woman wrote a letter claiming that she is Colin's birth mother and his birth father is Sylvester Stallone. There is a prominent rumor that his father is former Packers receiver James Lofton. Wrong again.

How do you get to know a man who doesn't want to be categorized? Start with the story he never tells.

Lance Kaepernick was born on June 12, 1979, on his father Rick's birthday. He went home with his mom, Teresa, and dad and older brother, Kyle, but soon he was back in the hospital with a failing heart. He had two surgeries but died when he was 23 days old. Rick and Teresa were devastated. A year later they had another son, Kent, and knew right away something was wrong. Kent was born blue. More heart problems. Kent died four days later.

Teresa got pregnant again in 1981, and a genetic counselor told her that if she had a boy, the risk of a heart defect was as high as 50%. Could they handle more grief? Luckily, they never found out. She gave birth to a healthy girl named Devon, and the Kaepernicks decid-

THE HARDEST LOSSES Kaepernick's parents, Teresa and Rick (right), had two healthy children (Devon and Kyle, far right) but also two who died before they adopted Colin in 1987.

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TOP); MICHAEL ZAGARIS (WITH PARENTS); COURTESY OF THE KAEPERNICK FAMILY

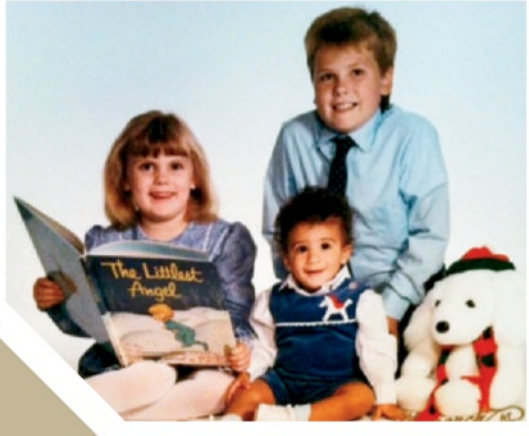
ed not to risk another pregnancy.

In 1987 they adopted Colin. He was born to a white mother named Heidi Russo and an African-American father whose name the Kaepernick family knows but will not divulge.

Russo gave the Kaepernicks a letter for Colin to open when he was 18, as well as half of the genetics that amaze his family, even today. Colin was so athletic that Kyle's friends nicknamed him Bo, after Bo Jackson. But his defining trait was competitiveness.

"I just felt like I saw things differently than most people, as far as what I wanted to do, who I wanted to be," Kaepernick says. "Even the way I carried myself, I thought it was different. I didn't know if it was good or bad at the time. A lot of kids played sports and did things because they were fun. To me it was, How can I win? Other kids would be like, *We lost the game. Let's have a sleepover.* I don't want to have a damn sleepover. We just lost!"

This childhood drive was unusual in the Kaepernick family, where



men tend to drive toward success in the slow lane. Rick coasted through his 20s, working at a cheese plant in Wisconsin, making hourly wages, volunteering for layoffs whenever they were offered so he could spend time ice fishing and playing softball before he went back to work. He justified his lack of ambition by telling himself that every time he was laid off, he helped somebody else stay employed. He eventually realized he wanted more, so he went back to college and landed a management job at Hilmar Cheese Company in Hilmar, Calif., a half hour from Modesto. (He's now the senior vice president of growth and development.) Kyle was the same way: Smart enough to do well on his high school tests but too interested in his social life to do all his homework. He now works as a process integration manager at Hilmar.

> "It wasn't, 'I want to play in the NFL,' Teresa says. "It was, 'I want to be a big-time star in the NFL.' He has always talked that way."

Along came Colin, who was still in elementary school when he told his parents the same thing he would write down for Harbaugh.

"It wasn't, 'I want to play in the NFL,' " Teresa says. "It was, 'I want to be a big-time star in the NFL.' He has always talked that way."

His drive could be exasperating. Young Colin stuffed his winter jacket into his backpack when he got on the school bus so teachers would not make him wear it. He thought it hindered him on the playground. In high school he insisted on pitching in a baseball game when he had pneumonia, against his mother's wishes. He threw a no-hitter.

Kaepernick's parents realized early: This boy didn't need to be pushed. He needed to be guided. When Colin was in elementary school, his test scores were so high that he was invited to join the county's gifted and talented program. It would have meant attending a different school, with the best students in the area. Many parents were desperate to get into the program. Rick and Teresa turned it down. "It takes all kinds to make a world," Teresa says. "You need to learn some tolerance and work with people who aren't maybe as smart as you. I didn't want to isolate him and put him with just the smart kids. He [had to] learn patience."

Most people in his hometown of Turlock thought his future was in baseball—he had a 90-plus-mph fastball, scholarship offers and interest from major league scouting directors. Sorry. Wrong category. Kaepernick told teams not to draft him. He was a football player.

Kyle sent Colin's football highlight videos to more than 100 colleges, hoping somebody would bite. But Colin hadn't asked him to do that. He would not beg. He just played. He could have padded stats to attract recruiters, but

when his coaches at Pitman High would give Kaepernick freedom—*Kap, call whatever you want*—he almost always chose to hand off.

Boise State showed some interest but backed away. Kaepernick told one of his high school coaches, "I hope I sign with somebody that plays Boise. I want to drop 60 on them." His first game as a starter was against the Broncos. The Wolf Pack scored 67. Nevada lost in four overtimes, but Kaepernick ran for 177 yards and two touchdowns, and threw for 243 yards and three more touchdowns.

He became the first major-college quarterback to pass for 10,000 yards and rush for 4,000 in his career. Still, he was viewed as raw, and a product of the pistol offense. The Chicago Cubs drafted him in the 43rd round in 2009, after his sophomore year, and would have paid him almost $50,000 to play minor league ball during one college summer, but he refused. He wanted to work at football. Five quarterbacks were chosen ahead of him in the '11 draft, and when Harbaugh chose Kaepernick to start ahead of popular Alex Smith the next year, many observers questioned the move. Then Kaepernick became a star after all those years of rejection, and people around the country said, *Wow, look at that guy. What a natural talent!*

Look at this guy. What a dork. "Imagine him eating a bowl of cereal, watching *SpongeBob*, with remote-controlled helicopters all over the floor," Lockette says. "He's not cool at all. If we're out, it's probably for a reason. It's not like, We're bored, let's go to the clubs."

Kaepernick's goal was always to be the best player, not the most popular or the richest. When he signed his $5.2 million rookie contract, he bought a big-screen TV, a bedroom set and a couch, and put the rest of his signing bonus in bonds. Not even stocks. Bonds. After a few months of paychecks, his financial adviser called his dad to ask why he wasn't spending any money. He owns one car, a Jaguar, and that was a freebie for an endorsement deal.

Kaepernick, who looks and dresses like a hip-hop star, understands his image as the coolest player in the NFL, but he isn't interested in selling it. He doesn't even believe it himself. "I feel like I'm a good dude, and I'm a cool person to be around, but I'm not that damn cool," Kaepernick says. "As much as I'd like to think, This is great, everybody loves me, I just don't buy that. It was never like that before."

Many athletes acknowledge it is fair to criticize their performance as long as you don't question their character. Kaepernick takes the opposite view. You can think whatever you want about him as a person. He knows who he is, so "if some guy in Chicago I've never met has a perception that I'm an a------, that's not gonna ruin my day." But if you question his performance, he will take note, "because to me, that's my career. That's what I've worked for."

If he held a football like he holds a grudge, he would never fumble. Ask Mike Mayock. Last September, a few days before the 49ers played the Rams, the NFL Network broadcaster and his cohorts sat with Kaepernick for a production meeting, a routine procedure in which the game's announcers pepper coaches and quarterbacks from each team with questions so they can be well-informed on the air. Mayock says Kaepernick's "answers were brief to nonexistent. The attitude was basically, I don't want to be here."

Everybody in the room seemed to feel the tension except Kaepernick. He admits it was "probably the shortest interview ever" but explains, "There are certain people I just refuse to talk to," and Mayock is one of them. He did not like what Mayock said about him leading up to the draft. Mayock says many players have thanked or teased him for his predraft evaluations, but only Kaepernick gave him the silent treatment.

"I had no idea it was because of me," Mayock says. "My memory is, I thought I was highly complimentary of the kid."

Mayock *was* complimentary. "He's got a huge arm, man," he said during the combine, and at one point he actually started giggling as he talked about Kaepernick's performance at the Manning Passing Academy the previous summer, where Eli and Peyton Manning were stunned by how hard Kaepernick threw.

MARK OF A WINNER It was not Jim Harbaugh (right) but his father, Jack, who stamped Kaepernick as a sure thing.

JEFF LEWIS/ICON SMI (FAR LEFT); MICHAEL ZAGARIS

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

But Mayock also questioned Kaepernick's mechanics and consistency, and that was all Kaepernick needed to hear. As his brother, Kyle, says, "Once you cross him in a way that makes him feel like, *You're dead to me*, you're dead forever to him."

And Kaepernick's mistrust of the media has only grown. This spring, he found himself in a TMZ headline, never a good place to be. COLIN KAEPERNICK INVESTIGATED FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT, the site reported, spawning a hundred more headlines and a whole bunch of agony in the Kaepernick household. The investigation concluded that there was no evidence any crime had been committed, but Kaepernick's reputation hung in the air for 69 days before he was officially cleared. His father counted. But Kaepernick was mostly annoyed by how it affected his life, his ability to do what he wanted when he wanted. He wouldn't even leave home, for fear of creating another headline. "At first, it didn't bug me, but after 2½ months, it was like, Is this what things have come to now? I'm a prisoner in my own house?" he says. "To me, what blows my mind is—nothing personal to you—but how the media is very quick to jump on anything. 'Oh, breaking news! It's a sexual assault case!' Hold on. How did it even get released that way?"

He doesn't understand how people can assume the worst because he has never thought like that. In this way, too, he is the exception in his own family. Teresa calls herself "a born cynic," and Kyle says, "Most people have an angle. It's pretty rare to find people that don't." But last Christmas Eve, Rick and Colin pulled up to a stoplight and saw a guy holding a sign saying he was homeless. Colin pulled all the money out of his wallet—probably less than $50, he says—and asked his father to give it to the man.

Rick said, "How do you even know that guy is really homeless?"

And Colin replied, "How do you know he's not?"

When Colin turned 18, Teresa handed him a letter from his birth mother. He read it once and put it back in a drawer. He already knew everything he wanted to know. Colin rarely asked questions about his birth parents. Teresa would probe him now and again, to see if there were any emotions he needed to sort out, but there weren't.

But people hear that he won't meet with Russo and they shove him into another category. *He is angry. He is driven by being rejected at birth. Teresa will get mad.* The Kaepernicks have heard it all. The real answer is much simpler.

"My family has loved me unconditionally since they got me," he says. "I never had the feeling that something was missing. Why would I go looking for something I don't need. That's a very hard concept for people to understand."

Teresa has kept in touch with Russo throughout Colin's life and occasionally asks if he wants to meet his birth mother. The answer has always been no, even more so after Russo, a nurse in Colorado, went public with her plea to meet him in 2012. That is not how you get to Colin. "The harder you push, the more he'll push away," Kyle says. "I've seen it 100 times. Most of his best friends are the ones that can go a month without talking to him."

Teresa has decided that she won't bring it up again, and why should she? A 1996 study by the American Adoption Congress showed that 65% of adopted children wanted to meet their birth parents. But that means that 35% did not.

He is not angry. He is grateful. He has told Rick and Teresa, *If another family had raised me, I think I might have been a bad kid.*

"I know myself," he says. "I would test the limits of everything and see how far I could push things."

Puzzle solved, Coach: The competitiveness is who Kaepernick is. The compassion comes from how he was raised. After he turned pro, he found the charity he wanted to support above all others: Camp Taylor. There are several camps throughout California for children with heart disease. Colin visits and swims and talks with the kids for hours. His parents go with him sometimes. When Rick looks into the eyes of the children, he sees his own boys.

Lance would be 35 now, and Kent would be almost 34, and it's easy to imagine them sitting between Kyle and Devon at a 49ers game, cheering on Colin . . . except, of course, if the boys had lived, Rick and Teresa would not have adopted. Colin would live somewhere else, with other parents. Maybe he would have been that bad kid, testing the limits of everything, or maybe he would have succeeded anyway. It doesn't matter. Lance and Kent are gone, but their parents think of them every day. They remain a part of the family. Colin is their brother. □

Open the Google app and say, "**Ok Google**, show me SPORTS ILLUSTRATED covers of Colin Kaepernick"

ANDY BENOIT'S DIVISION STANDINGS

AFC EAST
Patriots (1)	13-3
Dolphins (5)	10-6
Bills	5-11
Jets	5-11

AFC NORTH
Ravens (4)	11-5
Steelers (6)	10-6
Bengals	8-8
Browns	4-12

AFC SOUTH
Colts (2)	12-4
Texans	6-10
Titans	4-12
Jaguars	3-13

AFC WEST
Broncos (3)	12-4
Chargers	9-7
Chiefs	6-10
Raiders	2-14

NFC EAST
Eagles (4)	10-6
Giants	9-7
Redskins	7-9
Cowboys	5-11

NFC NORTH
Packers (1)	13-3
Bears	10-6
Lions	6-10
Vikings	4-12

NFC SOUTH
Buccaneers (3)	11-5
Saints (5)	11-5
Falcons	9-7
Panthers	5-11

NFC WEST
Seahawks (2)	12-4
49ers (6)	11-5
Cardinals	7-9
Rams	6-10

Omaha! Omaha! SI is audibling. For the first time in nearly two decades we've entrusted all the scouting reports in the NFL Preview, as well as the team rankings, to a single analyst. (Peter King is still making SI's Super Bowl pick.) Andy Benoit began writing about the NFL as an 11-year-old in Boise, Idaho, then deepened his knowledge with repeated visits to NFL Films in Mt. Laurel, N.J. A contributor from Day One on TheMMQB.com—where, in addition to his weekly Deep Dive column, you can read about his cats, Mr. Fizzles and Othercat—Benoit, 28, treated the 2013 season like *CSI: NFL*, poring over the All-22 coaches' footage from every game, again and again, then meeting with dozens of coaches to confirm his pigskin diagnoses. Once the season kicks off, you can keep up with his film-study observations on Twitter by following @Andy_Benoit.

QB **RYAN TANNEHILL**, DOLPHINS

Photograph by **Chris Trotman** Getty Images

Open the Google app and say, "**Ok Google**, what current NFL teams have never played in the Super Bowl?"

SCOUTING REPORTS

The MMQB

Turn the page for **Peter King's Super Bowl pick**

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The MMQB

PETER KING'S SUPER BOWL XLIX PREDICTION

QB AARON RODGERS

Packers 30

Colts 23

It's a particularly hard year to pick the Super Bowl.

Oh, shut up. You say that every year.

Yes, but. . . .

I'm determined not to pick a repeat, because, you know, champions don't repeat much. In fact, they don't do well in January of the following year. Four of the last eight Lombardi Trophy winners haven't made the playoffs the next year, and the other four lost their postseason openers.

In the wake of the Seahawks' destruction of the Broncos in last season's Super Bowl—and after watching Russell Wilson throw terrific deep ball after terrific deep ball in training camp—it's hard to come up with a good reason Seattle won't win. Other than history, of course. "We've got the itch," Wilson says. "We're not through."

Wilson & Co. enter the season as the best team, but I'm picking the champion to come from 1,647 miles east of Seattle: Green Bay. And the matchup in Glendale, Ariz., in February will become the next version of the annual Tom Brady–Peyton Manning Bowl: Aaron Rodgers's Packers 30, Andrew Luck's Colts 23.

Green Bay has an amazingly deep offense with the most diverse and efficient triggerman in football. Look it up: Rodgers is 7.7 career passer-rating points better than Manning, 2.4% more accurate than Brady, and has a higher touchdown percentage and lower interception percentage than Drew Brees. Now GM Ted Thompson has finally provided Rodgers with both a premier back, Eddie Lacy, and the downfield receiving threats that every great quarterback needs.

But this isn't going to be about the offense. It's going to be about the Packers' defense, which has been run out of the playoffs by 49ers QB Colin Kaepernick (two games, 279 rushing yards) the last two postseasons.

That's dicey, counting on the D—especially after losing B.J. Raji, the only good nose man in coordinator Dom Capers's 3–4 scheme, to a torn biceps. Without Raji, and with poor depth behind him, the Pack might play more 4–3, and strong running teams (like Seattle, on opening night) could exploit Green Bay on the ground. That puts more pressure on two other risky players from the front seven. Clay Matthews is a stud at outside linebacker, but he has missed nine games in the last two years to various injuries. He assured me in camp that he'd be a 16-game player again—but who in camp doesn't think that? And free-agent signee Julius Peppers, 34, has to bring the heat like he's 30. He's shifting from down end to standup outside 'backer, and Capers plans to move him around liberally, not just say, *Sic the quarterback.*

It's Peppers, really, who could make or break this unit. I expect the Packers to spot him more; he averaged 912 snaps over the past

Open the Google app and say, "**Ok Google**, show me the Vince Lombardi Trophy."

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

four years in Chicago, and Capers will likely take a less-is-more approach. "I think we finally found that piece," Matthews said in camp. "Funny, when the Bears let him go, he was too old, too slow. But I see him get off the ball at practice; it's still there. Julius will take stress off everyone [else]. We can both run, both cover, and I think we'll be asked to do it all."

Add a (finally) healthy Casey Hayward at cornerback, and the refurbished defense will be good enough to keep Rodgers from having to put up 33 every week.

Not that it will be easy. The NFC is stacked. My playoff picks vary a bit from Andy Benoit's: I predict the Eagles win home field (weak division, rising O), and the Saints and the Seahawks add to the conference's power foursome. Any of those could go on a December run and obliterate the field, but I'm choosing the most balanced offense in Green Bay's. Seattle's won some big road games in the Pete Carroll era, but with the 12th man watching on TV, the Seahawks won't have the same juice they had in 2013, when they held home field advantage.

The AFC isn't quite the jayvee—not with Brady and Manning still dueling for supremacy—but it doesn't have the depth of the NFC. The Colts have a favorable schedule (it's a good year to be playing the NFC East) and a quarterback, Luck, who's ready to take the next step in Year 3. Throwing for 3,822 yards in 2013 with a plus-14 TD-to-INT ratio is impressive—but Luck can be better, and he knows it. I think he will be, especially with the return of a rising-star tight end, Dwayne Allen, from a hip injury.

Packers over Colts is the pick, much to the chagrin of Seattle fans—or maybe to their delight, given my dismal record with Super Bowl predictions. But don't blame me. Blame history. □

Turn the page for Andy Benoit's scouting reports.

FEELING THE HEAT

From scared to safe, SI examines the job security of every NFL head coach

RANKINGS BY DOUG FARRAR

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CB **DARRELLE REVIS**

1

EAST

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

With one addition in the secondary, Bill Belichick's D turned a huge corner. Now, beware the *man-free lurk*

Darrelle Revis knows the value of a shutdown corner. He held out as a first-round draft pick for the Jets in 2007, then as an established superstar in '10 and, basically, again in '13, when he forced a trade to the Buccaneers. Each time he came away with major money. After his release from Tampa last March, Revis surveyed the scene and landed a sweet deal with the Patriots: $12 million for one year, with a $20 million team option in '15 and a clause that prohibits the franchise tag.

Tip your cap to the 29-year-old. The NFL is the most cutthroat of businesses, and Revis has repeatedly gotten the most out of negotiations with billionaire-owned organizations adept at protecting their own interests.

So why, exactly, is Revis so successful? What's his leverage? You've heard that he's a shutdown corner, but what does that really mean?

The answer starts here: Revis can single-handedly eliminate an opponent's best receiver in man coverage. This significantly constricts an offense—especially a pass-oriented one. But the hidden benefits of a shutdown corner are even more extraordinary. It's not just that Revis is able to take the No. 1 receiver out of a game—it's that the other 10 defenders *know* he can. This allows them to ignore Revis's area and put all their energy into a smaller field. It's simple geometry: The less area each defender has to account for, the more they can all swarm. This is how defenses "play fast."

New England coach Bill Belichick is clearly eager to build upon the man-coverage concepts that his defense has run almost exclusively over the past several years. In addition to sign-

CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 12–4

WEEK 1

MIA

MIN

OAK

KC (MON)

CIN

BUF

NYJ (THUR)

CHI

DEN

BYE

IND

DET

GB

SD

MIA

NYJ

BUF

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

ing Revis, he brought in former Seahawks cornerback Brandon Browner, a king-sized press-man maven who flourishes when playing to his help coverage. Browner will miss the first four games for violating the league's substance-abuse policy, but the Pats still have a rich stable of reserve corners: veteran Kyle Arrington, second-year playmaker Logan Ryan and budding outside stopper Alfonzo Dennard.

Many teams play man-to-man behind some form of blitz—but blitzes are not high on Belichick's list. His image as a mad-genius defensive schemer to the contrary, he prefers a sound, safe, coverage-based approach. Belichick's man-to-man is likely to place one safety over the top, with the other roving underneath. This coverage, called man-free lurk, is ripe for disguises and rotational switches if a coach is so inclined.

With Revis and rangy free safety Devin McCourty (a converted first-round corner), the Patriots have the key ingredients for man-free lurk. And, instead of always using either of two young strong safeties, Duron Harmon or Tavon Wilson, as the lurker, they can employ second-year linebacking stud Jamie Collins. A former high school quarterback who played safety, linebacker and defensive end at Southern Miss, Collins has the athleticism to blanket tight ends, read-and-react fluidly from zone, rush the passer and defend the run, both as a chaser and as an edge setter. Simply put, he's a 6' 3", 250-pound chameleon with a chance to be a top 10 NFL defender.

Joining Collins at linebacker is Jerod Mayo, a talented, multidimensional veteran who missed 10 games last year with a torn right pectoral muscle, and Dont'a Hightower, an effective run stopper but only a mediocre pass defender. Hightower will come off the field in throwing situations, when Belichick's big concern will be whether his four-man pass rush can generate even a little heat on the passer.

Sinewy Chandler Jones had 11½ sacks last season thanks in large part to his agility in confined areas. But Jones is not a terrifying speedster off the edge. Nor is fellow defensive end Rob Ninkovich. And backup Will Smith, a free-agent pickup who missed all of 2013 with a left-ACL tear, may not have much left in the tank. Hoping to ramp up the pressure inside, the Patriots used a first-round pick on gap shooter Dominique Easley (Florida), who they imagine will rotate with tackles Vince Wilfork (coming off an Achilles injury) and Chris Jones (just a guy) once Easley's surgically repaired knee is healthy.

If the pass rush does turn out to be anemic, Belichick may need to bolster it with blitzers. Failing that, he'll have to lean almost entirely on his secondary. Most likely, the Mount Rushmore coach will do a little bit of both.

Flexibility, after all, is another advantage that comes with signing a shutdown cornerback. □

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

FOCUS ON Backfield versatility

Shane Vereen, the fourth-year slasher from California has the lateral agility and vision to be a dynamic complementary piece of a New England offense that now relies more on the ground game, be it through actual running plays or through play-action. His 4.7 yards per carry last season was nothing to marvel at, but a wrist injury sidelined him for half the year and limited his carries to 44. His numbers will rise in 2014. And his value is even greater as a receiver: Not only can he catch passes out of the backfield, but he can also split out wide and run almost the entire route tree. He has the quickness and hands to beat many cornerbacks, and he can easily separate from linebackers, who tend to follow him when he shifts outside. There's talk of free-agent receiver **Brandon LaFell** filling the Swiss Army–knife role that once belonged to Aaron Hernandez. Perhaps. But more likely Vereen—a true run-and-pass weapon—will be the team's hybrid force.

THE CASE FOR Quarterback Tom Brady

Let's end the nonsense right now: Brady, 37, is not in decline. While he was not his usual surgical self in the first half of last season, he also had a callow receiving corps that struggled with running New England's patented option routes. But Brady adapted, not just to his young wideouts but also to the absence of his tight ends, the incarcerated Aaron Hernandez and the injured Rob Gronkowski, who missed games in batches. The ever-changeable Patriots simply went to a more run-based offense and finished with the AFC's second-best record. **It takes a special kind of field general to win games while reworking a scheme in the middle of a season**. Brady's right arm remains strong. His accuracy is pinpoint, even when he has to make drastic moves in the pocket (something he does as well as any quarterback ever). And his awareness grows with each snap, which is why he can work through all of his progressions in the time it takes the typical quarterback to work through half of his. Brady's heir might now be on the Pats' roster: second-round pick Jimmy Garoppolo out of Eastern Illinois. But it should be at least three years—and maybe as many as five—before Garoppolo takes meaningful snaps.

WR BRIAN HARTLINE

MIAMI DOLPHINS

The controversial offensive line gets a remake and—even more important—a new scheme to make its job easier

EAST

You may have heard: The Dolphins had a little trouble with their offensive line last year. But as wretched as things were in the locker room (see: Richie Incognito, Jonathan Martin), they were just as bad *on* the field. Quarterback Ryan Tannehill got slapped around incessantly and was sacked 58 times, 10 more than the next-most-battered QB, Joe Flacco. A sack total like that can be the sign of an inexperienced quarterback's not knowing where to go with the ball. But that wasn't the case in Miami; the line was just that bad.

Not surprisingly, new GM Dennis Hickey immediately overhauled the front five. He signed Chiefs left tackle Branden Albert for five years at $47 million ($20 million guaranteed) to replace Martin; bookended him with Ja'Wuan James, the No. 19 pick, out of Tennessee; and shelled out $5.5 million over two years for free-agent guard Shelley Smith, an underrated run blocker from St. Louis. The other guard spot will be filled by either last year's third-round choice, Dallas Thomas, or late off-season pickup Daryn Colledge. The only holdover starter, Pro Bowl center Mike Pouncey, will miss at least the first month of the season after tearing a hip labrum during OTAs.

Those are some serious personnel maneuvers—although Hickey might have been able to get away with less drastic ones. That's because Miami will automatically get a boost up front from the no-huddle spread system that's been installed by first-time coordinator Bill Lazor, who was Chip Kelly's quarterbacks coach last year in Philadelphia.

Here's a key reason that Kel-

BRAD PENNER/USA TODAY SPORTS

ly's scheme will go viral in the NFL: It naturally minimizes the impact of the offensive front. O-line versus D-line on passing downs is the biggest mismatch in football—it's absurdly difficult for a 320-pound offensive tackle to contend with a quick, 260-pound defensive end. This becomes particularly problematic on seven-step dropbacks, when blockers must provide their quarterback with even more time to throw.

But in a no-huddle spread most of the passing designs ensure that every eligible receiving target is a viable threat, giving a quarterback five places to throw. The ball comes out quickly—often on a three-step drop, sometimes on a one-step drop. As long as the linemen don't completely blow their blocks, it's almost impossible for a pass rusher to reach the quarterback in time. And since a middling lineman will suffice, the front office can spend its money on other positions.

One position the Dolphins have already invested in is wide receiver. The previous regime gave Mike Wallace $30 million in guarantees last year, which makes him wildly overpaid. The 28-year-old speedster has said he's excited about being used in a variety of ways under Lazor—though if he were truly capable of flourishing in myriad roles, his previous coaches in Miami and Pittsburgh wouldn't have limited him to running outside fly patterns.

Good thing the Dolphins have a wealth of other options. Sixth-year receiver Brian Hartline led Miami in catches (76) and yards (1,016) last season and was even treated by some defenses as Miami's primary threat. Given his well-rounded route running, don't be surprised if he leads the team again. Second-round rookie Jarvis Landry (LSU) will compete for No. 3 duties with big, smooth interior-possession target Rishard Matthews and up-and-coming Brandon Gibson (who returns from a left-ACL injury). Then there's tight end Charles Clay, one of the league's most versatile players, who's effective coming out of the backfield or split wide.

The man charged with getting the ball to that group, the 26-year-old Tannehill, has developed commendably over his first two seasons. He has proved to be effective on the move, which will serve him well in the read-option and in the rollouts featured in Lazor's scheme. He's also a sound (and developing) decision maker. Tannehill's only glaring weakness: his deep ball, which often has too much air under it.

Sometimes that has to do with a young quarterback's bracing to get hit. But that shouldn't happen as often to Tannehill, operating behind a new offensive line and under a new system that, if successful, will create a new culture in Miami. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-8

WEEK 1

NE
BUF
KC
LONDON OAK
BYE
GB
CHI
JAX
SD
DET
THUR BUF
DEN
MON NYJ
BAL
NE
MIN
NYJ

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

JC RIDLEY/CSM

FOCUS ON The cornerbacks

Defensive coordinator **Kevin Coyle** spent four years as a Bengals assistant under Mike Zimmer (who now runs the show in Minnesota), and he shares his former boss's affinity for coverage disguises and rotations. If executed properly, those can be the best way to get a secondary to overachieve. Just as Zimmer had two retread cornerbacks with the Bengals—Terence Newman and Adam Jones—Coyle has **Brent Grimes** and **Cortland Finnegan**. Grimes, 31, recently earned a new four-year, $32 million contract by bouncing back from a 2012 Achilles injury with a Pro Bowl year. He's an excellent leaper, which can offset his diminutive stature. He's also erudite in individual coverage technique. The same can be said of Finnegan, though the 30-year-old must bounce back from a deplorable '13 season in St. Louis. If he regains his form, Finnegan is an excellent nickel slot defender and a blitzing threat—something the creative Coyle will certainly use to great advantage.

THE CASE FOR Defensive end Olivier Vernon

If you watched the Dolphins last year, you most definitely heard Vernon's name called often. The second-year end from Miami finished with a team-leading 11½ sacks, tied for third in the AFC, and he was even more adept at run stopping. The 6' 2" Vernon moves with natural fluidity and—though listed at a modest 268 pounds—brings a respectable bull rush from the right side. He also benefits from playing on **a line that has quietly developed into one of the best units in the NFL**. Inside, hybrid players Jared Odrick and Randy Starks offer tremendous combinations of strength and quickness, allowing them to consistently shed blocks. On the opposite side, Cameron Wake is regularly among the league leaders in both sacks and holding penalties drawn. And Miami's most gifted lineman may be backup end Dion Jordan, the third pick in the 2013 draft, who can be used off the edge and as a spy in coverage—that is, when he's back from a four-game PED suspension. The Dolphins should survive Jordan's absence just fine. Vernon may not be quite as athletic as Jordan, but that hasn't hampered him yet; after playing a reserve role as a rookie, he proved last year to be quite a handful for blockers.

WR **SAMMY WATKINS**

3

BUFFALO BILLS

Trading up to draft a game-breaking receiver would have been a good move if that was all they needed. It's not

EAST

Fresh off a third consecutive six-win season and trying to avoid a 10th straight sub-.500 campaign, the Bills had one goal entering the opening night of this year's draft: Clemson wideout Sammy Watkins. After failing to trade up with the Texans for the No. 1 pick, GM Doug Whaley swung a deal with the Browns and got Watkins at No. 4. The price: the ninth choice, plus Buffalo's first- and fourth-rounders in 2015.

Mortgaging the future was easy for the second-year GM; with the looming sale of the franchise following owner Ralph Wilson Jr.'s death in March, it's no guarantee that anyone from the front office—or from second-year coach Doug Marrone's staff—will be in Buffalo past 2014. The surest way to obtain job security: win immediately.

The last team to surrender a bounty of draft choices to select a blue-chip receiver was the 2011 Falcons, who sent the Browns—yep, them again—two first-round picks, plus a second-rounder and two fourth-rounders to get Julio Jones. But the Bills' situation isn't comparable. Atlanta was one receiver away from Super Bowl contention. Buffalo? This club was one receiver away from mere offensive respectability.

A fair question at this point is, Can a lone receiver really carry an offense? The NFL has become a passing league, sure, but the GM with whom Whaley made the trade for Watkins, Cleveland's Ray Farmer, made an interesting point in May when word got out about the yearlong suspension of his own Sammy Watkins, Josh Gordon. "Name the last big-time receiver to win a Super Bowl," Farmer said. "The last guy that really helped his team get there was T.O."—Terrell Owens, with the 2004 Eagles.

GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 6-10

WEEK 1

CHI

MIA

SD

HOU

DET

NE

MIN

NYJ

BYE

KC

THUR MIA

NYJ

CLE

DEN

GB

OAK

NE

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

Sure, Farmer was speaking out of self-interest. But many offenses today succeed with good-but-not-great receivers who can get open strictly through cunning play design. What Farmer did not acknowledge, however, is that most teams that reach the Super Bowl with such wideouts still have a big-time quarterback. And while the Bills have solid receivers alongside Watkins—jump-ball snagger Mike Williams, crisp route runner Robert Woods and backup speedsters T.J. Graham and Marquise Goodwin—they don't exactly have a Pro Bowl gunslinger distributing the ball.

Second-year starter EJ Manuel is still developing proper footwork and pocket poise. Those skills are vital to improving his accuracy, which last year suffered drastically the farther he had to throw. Intelligent as he is, Manuel is not near being able to reel off first downs with presnap adjustments or sharp postsnap recognition. And for those reasons, Marrone's three-receiver hurry-up system could continue its painful simplicity in 2014.

Buffalo will be an excellent case study in whether raw receiving talent alone can elevate a callow QB and a rudimentary system. The 50-year-old Marrone, known as an old-school O-line coach, was hired in large part because of his impressive midseason switch to a spread system at Syracuse in 2012. He has the personnel to spread out again in '14, not just because of his capable receivers but also because of two excellent pass catchers out of the backfield: C.J. Spiller, who has the lateral agility to create space, including when he lines up out wide; and Fred Jackson, who operates proficiently inside, particularly on screens.

Injuries, however, have been an issue for both backs. And though the Bills have a line capable of moving bodies in the ground game—especially after the drafting of tackles Cyrus Kouandjio (Alabama) and Seantrel Henderson (Miami), and given the continued dependability of center Eric Wood—Marrone's best chance at instant success is to lean on his young receivers to carry the spread. It's a system in which the simplification goes both ways: It's easy for a defense to figure out, but it also makes that defense easier to decipher. The spread's spacing creates difficulties for safeties and linebackers when it comes to disguising coverages, and Manuel will benefit from those predictable looks as he works to become a more proficient drop-back passer.

At least Buffalo's defense is on the upswing—even if it will have to overcome the departure in free agency of Pro Bowl safety Jairus Byrd (Saints) and a season-ending left-ACL injury to linebacker Kiko Alonso this summer. Third-year cornerback Stephon Gilmore is on track for superstardom, and there's a reasonable optimism that defensive ends Mario Williams and Jerry Hughes can again reach double-digit sack totals in Buffalo's new 4–3 zone system.

The soundest way to hide a developing quarterback is to win on the other side of the ball. Even with a game-breaker like Watkins, the Bills' defense needs to do that big-time in 2014. □

MARK LOMOGLIO/ICON SMI

FOCUS ON The defensive tackles

Despite finally receiving Pro Bowl honors in 2010 (and again in '12 and '13), 6' 1", 303-pound **Kyle Williams** still labors under many fans' radar. He shouldn't. With a mastery of leverage and remarkable initial quickness, Williams, 31, is one of the league's few every-down forces at defensive tackle—and an excellent fit in new coordinator Jim Schwartz's 4–3 scheme, which depends on gap-shooting penetration off the ball. That scheme should also energize Williams's linemate, **Marcell Dareus**, who despite myriad off-field issues enters the season with an opportunity to exhibit the talent that got him drafted No. 3 out of Alabama in '11. The 6' 3", 331-pound Dareus was often asked to hold ground against double teams in the Bills' previous system, but he excels when he can use his finesse to shed blocks in moving out of congested areas. And that's what Schwartz will have him do, even from a nose-shade position.

THE CASE FOR Cornerback Stephon Gilmore

You may not have heard much about the Bills' 2012 first-round pick from South Carolina, but barring injuries—like the broken left wrist that sidelined him for five games last season—**Gilmore will become a top three corner in '14**. That is, if he's used properly. Coordinator Jim Schwartz, known for his zone-oriented system, must be willing to use the physical, lanky Gilmore as a press-man corner, the way Pete Carroll has used Richard Sherman in Seattle. Gilmore, like Sherman, is a tremendous boundary defender, but given his extreme athleticism, he doesn't need to operate almost exclusively on the same side of the field, the way Sherman is used. He most likely will, though, as the Bills have a talented corner opposite him in Leodis McKelvin. Plus, they're set in the slot. Buffalo native Corey Graham was signed in free agency after emerging as a solid slot defender in Baltimore—a surprising acquisition because undrafted rookie Nickell Robey flourished last year as a man-to-man corner and slot blitzer. That quartet of talent at corner, led by Gilmore, helps offset the loss of free safety Jairus Byrd and could propel this defense to a second straight top 10 ranking.

RB **CHRIS IVORY**

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES

4

NEW YORK JETS

Undecided on—or at least unsure of—their QB, they'll need help elsewhere on offense. And that's a problem

EAST

It was a favorite saying of John Madden's: If you have two quarterbacks, then you really have none. Regardless of who starts in Week 1 (and it looks like it will be Geno Smith), the Jets are destined for a QB change at some point in 2014. Last year a preseason injury to Mark Sanchez dropped the job into Smith's lap. Smith, in turn, got benched for Matt Simms midway through a disastrous Week 13 loss to the Dolphins, which was preceded by a string of poor outings. Smith likely would have sat the following weeks, too, if there had been an experienced veteran option.

And suddenly that's the case: Behind Smith is tried-and-tested free agent Michael Vick, who as an Eagle in 2010 had the best season of his career under current Jets offensive coordinator Marty Mornhinweg. If the 34-year-old Vick—who is making $3.4 million more than Smith this year—snags the starting job at some point, history suggests it's only a matter of time until he gets hurt.

Whichever QB starts, there's a good chance that his weaknesses will overshadow his strengths. If it's Vick, then vacillating accuracy and durability are concerns; with Smith, it's decision making and ball security. The main difference: Smith's shortcomings are not as certain to recur.

Unlike Vick, Smith, 23, is far from a finished product; he's still malleable as a player. In 2013 he displayed an admirable willingness to hang in a crowded pocket and make gutsy throws under duress—a vital trait. Unfortunately, many of those throws were directed into crowds created by coverage disguises. But that's not unusual for a rookie quarterback who rarely took snaps under center in college. The question is

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-8

WEEK 1

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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

whether New York can be patient with his development, given that coach Rex Ryan and his staff are still not far from owner Woody Johnson's hot seat.

Winning with an inconsistent quarterback isn't impossible; it just requires a great supporting cast. And that's a luxury the Jets don't have, especially at wide receiver. If free-agent pickup Eric Decker ($15 million guaranteed) was remotely special, the Broncos would have used some of their considerable cap space to retain him. Assuming that 2012 second-round pick Stephen Hill remains a stiff and unaware route-runner, and that Jeremy Kerley is equipped strictly for the slot, then starting opposite Decker will be the inconsistent David Nelson.

If the Jets are in three-receiver personnel, they'll likely spread into plenty of two-by-two sets, allowing second-round rookie Jace Amaro, a 6' 5" 265-pounder, to play the slot. Amaro is categorized as a tight end, but he was basically an inside receiver at Texas Tech. As soon as he expands his game to become a more traditional tight end (particularly as an in-line blocker), he'll fully supplant starter Jeff Cumberland.

So how will the Jets get by? Run-pass balance is crucial when an aerial attack lacks weapons, and New York signed free agent Chris Johnson from the Titans to help achieve that. But while Johnson has talked about regaining his 2,000-yard form, talking about it is pretty much all he's done since 2009. He has never been able to break tackles, and on the verge of turning 29, his declining speed means he's no longer lethal. Johnson's longest run in Tennessee last season went just 30 yards.

With Johnson unable to consistently create his own space, the Jets will find that their best runner is Chris Ivory, a tenacious fifth-year backup who brings a burst to the perimeter and whose second effort is potent enough to take would-be small gains to the house. Ivory, however, has never proved capable of carrying a heavy load week to week, and so in addition to Johnson, he'll share carries with Bilal Powell, a steady all-around back who has just a hair more speed than it appears.

For a team stocked with mediocre skill players, it would sure help to have an O-line that can dictate the terms of engagement. That's not the case. Left tackle D'Brickashaw Ferguson and center Nick Mangold, the stalwarts of this unit, are still quality starters, but they're coming off lackluster seasons by their standards. Playing like that again in 2014 won't be enough to hide the line's glaring weaknesses, such as the one at left guard, where the laterally limited Brian Winters floundered as a third-round rookie last year. At right guard Willie Colon is still a road grader, but he's not dynamic. And right tackle Breno Giacomini has to survive on little more than brute force and nastiness.

Ryan's Jets have survived with anemic offenses before, even reaching the 2009 and '10 AFC championship games. But this defense can't carry New York nearly that far. That responsibility will fall to the quarterback . . . whomever he is. □

CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

MAJOR CONCERN Man-to-man cornerback

Coach Rex Ryan's designer blitzes—and his zone exchange concepts, which are pass rushes that look like blitzes but wind up bringing only four rushers—are predicated on creating confusion before the snap and early in the down. The sooner confusion sets in, the greater the likelihood that a quarterback will make a mistake. That's why the Jets, in their defensively driven deep-playoff-run years of 2009 and '10, only ranked near the middle of the league in sacks but still had the lowest completion percentage allowed. Many of Ryan's disguises and tactics hinge on having a lockdown man-to-man cornerback; that allows 10 other defenders to play zone across a smaller area. The problem: This season, instead of Darrelle Revis or Antonio Cromartie at corner, Ryan is stuck with **Dee Milliner**, who's coming off a dreadful rookie year and a preseason ankle injury, and **Dimitri Patterson**, who has never been asked to cover top-tier receivers. The Jets will struggle to be as complex and multiple as Ryan would like.

THE CASE FOR Defensive tackle Muhammad Wilkerson

The long-armed fourth-year pro may well be the best NFL defensive lineman not named J.J. Watt. Wilkerson has an uncanny burst attacking downhill or fighting through congestion. **His raw strength is staggering**—ideal in a 3-4 Jets scheme that asks linemen to destroy whoever's across from them rather than worry about gap control. The Jets' thinking: If their linemen can be destructive, then the offense's play is more likely to alter, allowing inside 'backers to read and react more effectively. This philosophy prompted New York to draft another monstrous end, Sheldon Richardson, in round 1 last year. Like Wilkerson, Richardson can fill any spot up front, and the 2013 Defensive Rookie of the Year is in line to play every snap in '14. At nosetackle the Jets have another standout disrupter in Damon Harrison. He's not a shimmering athlete, but he moves well in traffic and plays with leverage that lets him explode off blocks. Plus, he gets the benefit of facing single blocking—because he's next to the 6' 4", 315-pound Wilkerson.

ILB **DARYL SMITH**

KARL MERTON FERRON/BALTIMORE SUN/MCT/LANDOV

1

BALTIMORE RAVENS

This ain't the D you remember. Two years after a Super Bowl win, that unit's being rebuilt from the inside out

NORTH

The Ravens have long been built around their defense—but it's important to think about what *kind* of defense it's been. Historically, the NFL's great D's have had distinct identities. For example, the 2013 Seahawks, with their lanky corners and speedy linebackers, were designed to win on the perimeter. The '02 Buccaneers, with their gap-shooting defensive linemen and fast linebackers, dominated with downhill playmaking.

Baltimore, for the longest time, has been built to win in the middle of the field, where inside linebacker Ray Lewis roamed, and where its most feared player, free safety Ed Reed, patrolled the hashmarks. The Ravens' front line was led by a succession of behemoth defensive tackles—Sam Adams, Tony Siragusa and, most recently, 2006 first-round pick Haloti Ngata, who is still a star.

But one of the best-kept secrets in football is that this vaunted defense, particularly its interior, started decaying even before Lewis and Reed left. Baltimore's 2012 Super Bowl run was spearheaded by Joe Flacco and the offense. In four playoff wins the Ravens' D surrendered an average of 22 points; it was big plays and 31 points per game by the offense that propelled the team to the Lombardi Trophy.

In 2014 the middle could become this defense's weakest spot—not for a lack of talent but for a lack of experience. At Lewis's old position, free-agent pickup Daryl Smith was a sensational all-around player last year, but he'll work alongside either first-round rookie C.J. Mosley (Alabama) or last year's second-rounder, Arthur Brown, who has come along slowly and who appears destined to play only on passing downs. Mosley might prove to be an every-down

force, but he'd be the first rookie to accomplish that immediately in Baltimore's complicated multifront scheme.

Behind the linebackers, last year's first-round pick, strong safety Matt Elam, will play both in the box and in the middle, deep. Elam plays big and moves well, but he has gone through a steep learning curve. Now he'll be asked to be a leader for fellow safety Terrence Brooks, who has been competing with veteran pickup Darian Stewart for playing time. In the middle up front, the hope is that untested second-year pro Brandon Williams and enigmatic fifth-year man Terrence Cody can handle the all-important nose-tackle duties, which would allow Ngata to once again move around, lining up over guards and tackles.

So this is the Ravens' defense today: Coach John Harbaugh and coordinator Dean Pees have to hope that their stars and depth on the outside can compensate for their uncertain middle. While Baltimore lost budding end Arthur Jones to the Colts, consistently disruptive veteran Chris Canty and intriguing inside pass rusher Pernell McPhee can fill that void. There's also second-round rookie Timmy Jernigan (Florida State), though he may be here to sit and learn before ultimately replacing Ngata, who even at 30 is still in his prime but has been bothered by injuries in recent years.

On the edges Terrell Suggs is still a disruptive rusher and an even more fearsome run defender. Elvis Dumervil has so far given a good return on GM Ozzie Newsome's five-year, $26 million investment. And there's Courtney Upshaw, an up-and-coming five-tool player who can cover in the flats as well as rush the passer. He's also very successful at laterally sifting through run blockers.

And in the secondary, Harbaugh and his staff believe enough in fourth-year corner Jimmy Smith to swap a portion of their matchup-zone concepts for more press-man coverage. The long-armed Smith is a very effective jammer along the boundary, and he has improved his technique when the ball is in the air. On the other side, Lardarius Webb missed most of training camp with a back injury—this after tearing his left ACL in 2012. If healthy, Webb is one of the league's better man-to-man slot artists and a tremendous outside deep-ball defender.

Both corners will have to survive in plenty of Cover Zero (that is, true one-on-one) because most of the help will be dedicated to aiding the oft-overmatched Chykie Brown or untested Asa Jackson, one of whom will assume the nickel duties with Corey Graham now in Buffalo.

Perhaps the easiest explanation for how the Ravens' defensive decline has gone overlooked is that they finally have an offense capable of making up the difference. And that remains the case: The signing of free-agent receiver Steve Smith and the installation of new coordinator Gary Kubiak's play-action system should give Flacco and his cohorts more opportunities to beat the man coverages that have so often stifled them. It's a passing game that, through practices, will challenge a rebuilt defense to find its new identity. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-8

WEEK 1

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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

FOCUS ON The backfield

The Ravens had the third-worst rushing attack in the NFL last season. **Ray Rice** gained 3.1 yards per carry, backup **Bernard Pierce** averaged 2.9, and both men looked like 30-year-olds hitting the notorious running back wall. Except that Rice was 26 and Pierce 23. So how can they turn things around? Rice, who will first serve a two-game suspension for a domestic violence incident, must recapture his short-area east-west burst. An important factor will be his relationship with the blocking scheme. New offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak will implement a zone system similar to what Rice has spent his career running behind. There's a key difference, though: To set up the system's hallmark rollouts and play-action crossing patterns, Kubiak will call more stretch runs to the outside. And Pierce may actually be the better runner in this sense. While not as fast or quick as Rice, he's always had an innate sense for moving forward along the perimeter.

THE CASE FOR Receiver Steve Smith

For immediate impact, the 35-year-old Smith was the best free-agent signing of 2014. His speed hasn't declined, and he's always been skilled at outmuscling and outpositioning defenders to make catches. The Ravens got him for a reasonable price (three years, $10.5 million), and **he resolves what had been their receivers' most glaring issue: an inability to get open** against man coverage. Torrey Smith is an undeniable deep threat, but he's merely average on routes that don't call for straight-line speed. That's problematic if he's Baltimore's No. 1 target; not so much if he's the No. 2. The rest of the receivers will now come off the bench because new coordinator Gary Kubiak prefers a two-tight-end base over the three-wideout package Baltimore ran in 2013. Filling those tight end spots are Dennis Pitta and Owen Daniels, two fluid movers who can catch balls away from their bodies. If everyone stays healthy, this will be the best collection of targets that Joe Flacco has had—all because of the arrival of one still-dangerous 35-year-old.

ILB **LAWRENCE TIMMONS**

12

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

If the defense is going to regain its reputation for greatness, investments in the front seven have to pay off

AFC NORTH

No team in pro sports is more synonymous with stingy defense than the Steelers. Pittsburgh had the Steel Curtain in the 1970s, the zone-blitzing monsters in the '90s and the kamikaze playmaking Troy Polamalu groups in the 2000s. But lately this defense has drifted into mediocrity. In '12, though ranking first in yards allowed, it was just 25th in turnovers and 15th in sacks. Last season the turnover and sack numbers remained low (they ranked 27th and 25th in those categories), and thanks to unusually shoddy tackling, the Steelers fell to 13th in yards allowed. Most notably, they surrendered 17 plays of 40 yards or more, tied for fifth most in the league. Those big plays—five more than they had given up in the previous three seasons combined—are the leading reason Pittsburgh endured a second straight .500 season.

Creating big plays while not surrendering them has been the signature of longtime coordinator Dick LeBeau. Few think of the Steelers as having a bend-but-don't-break defense, but that's basically what it is—at least on first and second down, when LeBeau mostly stays in straight 3–4 looks and gives a cushion in coverage. With this approach he says to an offense, "You can have all the three-yard runs and five-yard completions you want. But you'll have to mount 12-play drives to score, and we're betting that at some point, you'll make a mistake. When you do, we'll pounce."

It's in third-and-long that LeBeau's zone-blitz packages come out, and this is where the sacks and forced turnovers need to happen. LeBeau's brilliance is that he can be aggressive without fully abandoning his conservative nature.

KARL WALTER/GETTY IMAGES

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FAILS TO FAIL

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-8

WEEK 1
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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

The whole idea of his zone blitz is to generate pressure without sacrificing coverage. So instead of rushing six players and hoping the coverage can hold up in man-to-man, he rushes just five—or sometimes even the standard four—but brings them from unpredictable spots. The extra bodies in coverage allow his man-to-man concepts to be mixed with matchup zones.

It's on GM Kevin Colbert to acquire the talent for this defensive scheme, and in recent years he's made hefty investments in the front seven. Last year he used his first-round pick on outside linebacker Jarvis Jones, who flashed unbelievable athleticism but at times struggled to fill his many roles (as countless Steelers rookies have). Jones will start opposite 26-year-old Jason Worilds, who is playing under the transition tag and needs a second straight productive season to warrant getting a long-term deal.

In May, Colbert used another first-round pick on a linebacker, Ohio State's Ryan Shazier, who will start at the weak-inside spot. That moves the team's best front-seven player, Lawrence Timmons, to strong inside 'backer. Timmons is a phenomenal downhill blitzer and an excellent cover guy, especially when sprinting to the flats, and he's just as strong against the run. The hope is that the fluid, versatile Shazier can develop into the same kind of player.

To aid their schematic diversity, the Steelers maintain depth at safety, where 12-year veteran Troy Polamalu is still the headliner. Last year, due to deficiencies in personnel, he had to play a more predictable linebackerish role when the Steelers were in their new predominant dime package (three cornerbacks, three safeties, one linebacker). But he should be able to return to his freelancing role this year, either with Shazier staying on in nickel packages or with second-year safety Shamarko Thomas showing enough improvement to earn playing time.

In the past Polamalu had been able to take unparalleled risks because he had an intelligent, fundamentally sound safety beside him in Ryan Clark. But in 2013 age caught up to Clark, and Pittsburgh signed Mike Mitchell to replace him. Mitchell was a solid box player and blitzer for the Panthers, but in Pittsburgh he must prove he can be adept in deep space.

Rounding out the defense is a cornerbacking group that's overlooked but reliable, led by 12-year veteran Ike Taylor. The secondary, though, has not been supported by a strong pass rush in recent years. If that's to change, fourth-year pro Cameron Heyward must continue to play at the first-round level he finally demonstrated last season, and second-round rookie tackle Stephon Tuitt must be prepared to play right away, sharing time with 35-year-old Brett Keisel. The 21-year-old Tuitt, out of Notre Dame, is yet another one of the young players who will determine if the Steelers will resume their tradition of defensive greatness. □

VINCENT PUGLIESE/GETTY IMAGES

FOCUS ON The backfield

By drafting running back **Le'Veon Bell** in the second round last year and taking road-grading guard **David DeCastro** in the first round of 2012, coach Mike Tomlin and GM Kevin Colbert declared their intention to be more balanced on offense and reclaim some of the franchise's classic bruising style. Last season, however, the Steelers rushed just 24.6 times a game, which ranked 25th in the league. Don't read too much into that stat, though. For one, Pittsburgh ran a lot of quick wide receiver screens that effectively served as run substitutes. Also Bell was—and is—a better runner than his 3.5 yards per carry last year suggests. He has light feet for a 6' 1" 230-pounder, and though stylistically a finesse guy, he consistently falls forward on contact. Just as important, he's a deft pass catcher who can line up at wide receiver in spread sets. Expect Bell to get around 25 touches a game, just not entirely through traditional handoffs.

THE CASE FOR Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger

Quietly, Ben Roethlisberger—who has always had amazing raw tools—**has matured into a well-rounded, even cerebral top-echelon quarterback** at 32. In the system of third-year offensive coordinator Todd Haley, with whom Roethlisberger has developed a good rapport after some early bumps, the QB is responsible for more presnap reads, which are vital to complete quick throws, especially out of spread sets. It's something that Big Ben, who used to live and die on improvisation, could not have done early in his career. In 2014 the Steelers will rely on Roethlisberger even more at the line of scrimmage. Not only are they expected to run more no-huddle—in which the QB typically calls the plays—but they're also making do with a receiving group that is thin once you get past star (superstar?) Antonio Brown. Untested '13 third-round pick Markus Wheaton and '14 fourth-rounder Martavis Bryant have been competing for the No. 2 job with sound veteran Lance Moore, the former Saint. Working with inexperienced wideouts will inevitably present challenges for Roethlisberger. But he's more equipped than ever to handle them.

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QB **ANDY DALTON**

3

CINCINNATI BENGALS

A new coordinator tries to do what the last one couldn't with this QB: Win a playoff game. Or is that a lost cause?

AFC NORTH

The Bengals of late get at the most fascinating question of the NFL's modern era: Does a franchise need a superstar quarterback to win a Super Bowl?

Russell Wilson, an excellent young playmaker but not yet a superstar, gave one possible answer last year in guiding the Seahawks to a title: Yes, if a team also has a once-in-a-decade defense. (See also: the Bucs, with Brad Johnson; the Ravens, with Trent Dilfer. . . .) Cincinnati's D is good—but not *that* good. Meanwhile, the Bengals possess a potent offense built around what appears to be an average quarterback. Which gets us back to the Question.

On the one hand, Andy Dalton is the first passer to have led Cincy to three straight playoff appearances, and he's just the fifth in league history to do that in his first three seasons. On the other, Dalton is widely blamed for first-round losses in each of those years.

In the 2011 wild-card round, against the Texans, Dalton threw three interceptions and zero touchdowns. One year later, in the same round against the same team, he completed just 14 of 30 passes for 127 yards and an interception. But neither loss drew critics' ire like his three-turnover stinker last year, in a home wild-card loss to the Chargers.

How much do these defeats fall on Dalton? In that first loss, recall that J.J. Watt made an otherworldly pick-six just before halftime, changing the tenor of the game. In the second meeting none of Dalton's receivers—including the redoubtable A.J. Green, against thick double teams—did him the favor of getting open. And against San Diego, Cincinnati's O-line failed to handle the slanting pressure

GARY WIEPERT/AP

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concepts brilliantly concocted by defensive coordinator John Pagano. Dalton was moved off his spot all afternoon and had no chance of establishing a rhythm.

Perhaps Dalton deserves less of the blame. Or maybe his inability to thrive amid chaos and outside of structure speaks to his ceiling.

The Bengals have all the pieces around Dalton. This line is well-schooled and filled with experienced leaders, like left tackle Andrew Whitworth, alongside a couple of talented-but-inconsistent first-rounders in right guard Kevin Zeitler and right tackle Andre Smith. They'll block for a rushing attack that will carry this offense even more than in the past. Giovani Bernard, a second-rounder in 2013, is one of the most electrifying backs in football, and this year's second-round pick, Jeremy Hill (LSU), appears to be a more dynamic early-down runner than BenJarvus Green-Ellis.

Nonetheless, Cincinnati's playoff fate will inevitably hinge on how new coordinator Hue Jackson (promoted from running backs coach to replace Jay Gruden, now the boss in Washington) manages the passing game—specifically, his lightning-rod signal-caller.

The operative word here: *manages*. Three playoff losses have accentuated what three regular seasons hinted at in drips and drabs: Dalton has limitations. Because you can't coach raw arm strength, Jackson must help Dalton through play design, just as Gruden did before him. Dalton, who is smart in the pocket, must be an even better anticipation passer—someone who consistently identifies throwing windows before they actually appear. It's now on the 26-year-old QB to develop the awareness, pocket poise and guts to be that when it counts most. And it's on Jackson to create defined reads to help him.

Back to the Question, this much can be agreed upon: If you don't have a superstar quarterback (or a historic D), you must possess at least one playmaking wide receiver. And after Calvin Johnson, Green is the best in the game. Tremendous start-stop acceleration and body control allow the 6' 4" 207-pounder to burst off the line of scrimmage and fluidly stem routes upfield, where he then either a) shifts gears and goes deep or b) throttles back underneath, creating separation that can only be combatted with double coverage. Green is sensational at adjusting to poorly thrown balls. The concern is how often he has to do this; he and Dalton still have not developed great chemistry.

Filling out the receiving corps, Marvin Jones is a budding star (when healthy) while Mohamed Sanu is a fine slot resource who can make possession catches outside. And the tight end duo of Tyler Eifert and Jermaine Gresham gives the Bengals pliability out of base personnel. Factor in a dynamic, versatile playmaker like Bernard and Jackson has the flexibility to play up-tempo football.

The idea is for Jackson to develop a scheme and a supporting cast strong enough to make an average quarterback look great. That's this team's best—and only—shot at a deeper playoff run. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 11–5

WEEK 1

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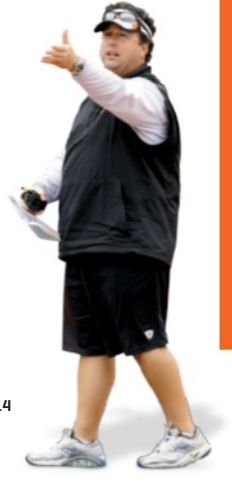
WEEK 17

HOME AWAY



KEY CONCEPT The play-action bomb

The deep ball is a key component of any offense; it's one the Bengals dialed up frequently under last year's offensive coordinator, Jay Gruden, and one they'll return to often under Gruden's replacement, Hue Jackson. While the play's distance makes it appear difficult, the opposite is actually true. Most play-action bombs are called on first down near midfield, where defenses typically align in predictable base packages and are likely to bring a safety down in the box. The quarterback only has to read his receiver's relation to the deepest safety. If the throw is not there, check down. If it is, a seven-step drop and run fake can take care of the pass rush. In **A.J. Green** the Bengals have one of the league's most effective deep threats. The only problem: **Andy Dalton** is not always on point with his ball trajectory and placement. The progress he makes in those departments will be key to creating an attack that matches Cincinnati's explosive personnel.

THE CASE FOR Defensive coordinator Paul Guenther

After longtime coordinator Mike Zimmer was called upon to take over the Vikings, the Bengals characteristically replaced him from within, promoting Guenther, a linebackers coach who came up through the ranks, starting as a special teams assistant. Guenther, 42, figures to continue what Zimmer started. **The Bengals have some of the sharpest 4–3 and nickel zone blitz concepts in football.** And thanks to the front office's commitment to drafting athletic D-linemen in the middle rounds each year, there's a bevy of resources along the front four to make those concepts work, even with the exit through free agency of end Michael Johnson, to Tampa. Geno Atkins was far and away the best 4–3 tackle in football before tearing his right ACL last Halloween. When he's fully recovered, rising young end Carlos Dunlap will face more single blocking, and a veteran secondary (which is skilled at disguising coverages) won't have to shoulder too heavy a burden. Guenther has never held this title in the pros, but with his myriad blitz concepts and understanding of multiple positions, he's in a position to succeed.

AL BEHRMAN/AP

QB **JOHNNY MANZIEL**

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

4

CLEVELAND BROWNS

It's exciting to have Johnny Football in town, but he isn't the answer to this franchise's woes

NORTH

Here's an ugly but very plausible scenario: It's mid-October, the leaves have turned, the pumpkins are out, and the Browns are well below .500. Johnny Manziel is running the offense because new coach Mike Pettine has given the quick hook to their more experienced but less celebrated quarterback, Brian Hoyer.

If this comes to pass, the long-suffering Cleveland fan base—which had been so energized by Johnny Football's arrival—will soon revert back to its downtrodden state, as the reality that many experts had observed earlier sinks in: Manziel is simply not an NFL quarterback. At best the faithful will be in denial, rationalizing that the reason Manziel isn't succeeding is that restrictive coaches are not letting Johnny be Johnny.

The Browns, unfortunately, are in a position where their quarterback must play well enough to elevate bad players around him. For that they have Josh Gordon to thank. The league's leading receiver in 2013 decided that being around pot was more important than playing football and earned a suspension for the entire year (appeal pending). That left Cleveland with a collection of receiving castoffs such as ex–Bengals slot man Andrew Hawkins and injury-prone former Cowboy Miles Austin. The exception is fluid tight end Jordan Cameron. How likely is it that Manziel can save the day? Forget the Johnny Football aura for a moment: When you break down the rookie's tools, you find merely decent speed, good quickness and adequate arm strength. (Sorry, but "playmaking moxie," whatever that is, is not an actual virtue.) In short, Manziel offers nothing the NFL hasn't seen be-

fore. Since everyone agrees that his 6-foot, 210-pound frame is not outstanding, it's easy to conclude that the reason we haven't seen a player like Manziel before is that a player with his skill set isn't capable of succeeding in the NFL. This feels like Tim Tebow all over again—except Tebow at least had the size and strength to withstand the pounding that mobile quarterbacks incur, and there were never concerns about his character or maturity.

Manziel played an unstructured brand of football at Texas A&M, and he runs a real risk of injury or midseason breakdown if he continues with that style as a pro. Some observers compare Manziel to Seattle's Russell Wilson because of their similar heights and propensities to run, but the cerebral Wilson entered the league as a highly disciplined and decisive quarterback.

New Browns offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan, at 34, one of the league's best young builders of offenses, will have to adjust the zone-blocking, play-action-based system he used in his offenses in Houston and Washington to accommodate his callow quarterback. But no matter how many rollouts or moving pockets Shanahan installs, he won't be able to anticipate his quarterback's freewheeling tendencies with any consistency. That complicates game-planning and also practices.

But this is what general manager Ray Farmer and owner Jimmy Haslam signed up for when they drafted Manziel. The experiment will be fun at times, but to win games the Browns will have to lean on their rushing attack. Newly signed Ben Tate played in a Shanahan-style scheme under Gary Kubiak the last three seasons in Houston and has the natural downhill power—and just enough wiggle—to thrive behind what should be an excellent offensive line headlined by All-Pro left tackle Joe Thomas and Pro Bowl center Alex Mack.

Without Gordon, any production through the air—especially on the third-and-longs that pop up frequently for a run-first offense—will have to come from play design. The problem is that such designs only work if you have a patient and intelligent quarterback. (Many believe the 28-year-old Hoyer, who won all three of his starts in 2013 before tearing his right ACL last October, is that guy.)

The best news for the offense is that Pettine, who was previously the defensive coordinator for the Jets and the Bills, might have the dominant defense that's mandatory for winning with a run-first approach, and that will keep the Browns in games. And, for whatever it's worth, the first-time NFL head coach will have, for at least the first few weeks of the season, that energized fan base (!) behind him. But once the honeymoon ends, he's still likely to be faced with tough questions at quarterback and a team on track for last place. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 4–12

WEEK 1
PIT
NO
BAL
BYE
TEN
PIT
JAX
OAK
TB
CIN THUR
HOU
ATL
BUF
IND
CIN
CAR
BAL
WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

FOCUS ON The pass rush

Mike Pettine likes to manufacture pressure on the quarterback through presnap disguise and blitz exchanges that make rushers hard to identify; offenses that guess wrong wind up with linemen blocking air. But the coach might not need to be that creative. He has an excellent bull-rusher in fourth-year outside linebacker **Jabaal Sheard**. If last year's No. 6 overall pick, **Barkevious Mingo**, takes a significant step forward (last year he badly needed to learn some NFL moves and increase his strength), Pettine will have a dynamic speed-rusher as well. Complementing those two at outside linebacker is 2013 free-agent pickup **Paul Kruger**. The former Raven is not quite as good as his five-year, $40.5 million contract, but he's capable of splashy plays and, like Sheard, he can set the edge in run defense. Typically these three players have rotated; it will be interesting to see if Pettine designs any third-down packages that have all three on the field.

THE CASE FOR Joe Haden & Justin Gilbert

For Mike Pettine to run the hybrid 3–4, blitz-heavy scheme that he learned under Rex Ryan, **he must have a cornerback who can handle opposing receivers one-on-one**, allowing for the safety on his side of the field to rove elsewhere or blitz. Pettine so values this kind of corner that the Browns have invested in two of them: fifth-year pro Haden *(left)*, who signed a six-year, $74.7 million contract ($45 million guaranteed) this off-season, and Gilbert, whom Cleveland took out of Oklahoma State with the eighth pick in this year's draft. Haden is as good as his price tag suggests. He has the quickness and fluidity to shadow receivers both outside and in the slot. And he can be a dangerous playmaker when challenged. (Just ask Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton, whom Haden intercepted twice, running one back for a score, in Week 11.) Gilbert will begin his NFL career matching up with the opposition's No. 2 receivers. With quarterbacks likely to avoid Haden, the 6-foot, 200-pound rookie will see plenty of balls come his way. But Pettine believes that by making good use of extra men in his pressure packages, he can help his top pick handle the onslaught.

RON SCHWANE/USA TODAY SPORTS

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QB **ANDREW LUCK**

1

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Already years ahead of where they hoped to be, Indy's passing game could take them on a deep playoff run

AFC SOUTH

The Colts are about three years ahead of the rebuilding plan they started when general manager Ryan Grigson and coach Chuck Pagano came aboard after a two-win season in 2011. Fueled by a 75% turnover in the roster, Indianapolis grabbed an AFC wild-card spot in '12, then went even further last year, reaching the divisional round despite season-ending injuries to top skill players Reggie Wayne, Dwayne Allen, Vick Ballard and Ahmad Bradshaw, and to left guard Donald Thomas (all before November, no less).

The catalyst in both seasons was Andrew Luck, a first-class athlete with unbelievable football instincts. In just his third year Luck is already an elite quarterback, causing Indy to update its rebuilding schedule: The plan now is to appear in the AFC championship game this winter—if not in Super Bowl XLIX. The QB now has the supporting cast to make it happen.

The question is, Which system best suits this group? Down the stretch last season offensive coordinator Pep Hamilton abandoned his preferred power-run scheme and went with more spread concepts, compensating for an anemic backfield and a lack of talent at wide receiver. The spread forced defenses to simplify and, thanks to crafty route design, allowed Indy's receivers to release cleanly off the line of scrimmage. Luck, with his ability to anticipate passing windows, extend plays and complete contested throws, took care of the rest.

While these aerial ploys were too effective to abandon, the 2014 Colts won't be as dependent on them. They have a

ANDREW HANCOCK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 11–5

WEEK 1

DEN

PHI MON

JAX

TEN

BAL

HOU THUR

CIN

PIT

NYG MON

BYE

NE

JAX

WAS

CLE

HOU

DAL

TEN

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

healthy Wayne, at age 35 one of the most intelligent and fundamentally sound receivers ever. They also have a motivated Hakeem Nicks, the Giants' castoff who's great at creating separation late in a route, which is perfect for Luck's style of play. Those two will allow deep burner T.Y. Hilton, who served as a No. 1 receiver last year because of injuries, to fill the far more fitting slot role almost full-time. And with Allen, a '12 third-round tight end, back from a right hip injury, the Colts now have more dimension underneath. That should alleviate pressure on the other tight end, Luck's former Stanford teammate Coby Fleener, an underachiever who shouldn't be written off yet.

Allen can also operate from the backfield, where he'll join either Trent Richardson or Ahmad Bradshaw. Richardson was acquired last September for a 2014 first-round pick but proved to be no better in Indy than he had been in Cleveland; he gained 2.9 yards per carry for the Colts, a half-yard less than with the Browns. The No. 3 draft choice out of Alabama in '12, Richardson has a tendency to overread the field, causing him to hesitate. It's almost as if instead of just bursting through a hole, he first waits for it to clog.

Don't be surprised if Bradshaw surpasses Richardson on the depth chart, much like Donald Brown (now a Charger) did last season. The 28-year-old ex-Giant is excellent out of passing formations, not just with picking up blitzes but also in executing screens and draws.

The biggest concern for the Indianapolis offense is whether the line can support the skill players. Besides his depleted backfield, one reason Hamilton drifted from his run-oriented system was that his front five lacked the power inside and the athleticism to maintain blocks long enough for play-action passes and other deep-drop designs to unfold. By going to the spread, Luck, who took far too many hits last year, was able to get rid of the ball more quickly.

The interior of the line has since been retooled. With Donald Thomas out again after suffering a season-ending quad injury in training camp, the left-guard job goes to second-round rookie Jack Mewhort out of Ohio State. At center, they're banking on last year's fourth-round pick, Khaled Holmes, who played all of 13 snaps as a rookie. If Holmes proves sturdy, returning right guard Hugh Thornton, a third-round pick of a year ago, will have someone to lean on.

Outside, tackles Anthony Castonzo and Gosder Cherilus are good but not quite top shelf, as they go through too many highs and lows. Nevertheless, the front five is certain to be better—which, with the Colts' weapons at the skill positions, means there's no limit to how far Luck can take them. □

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

FOCUS ON The defensive middle

Ryan Grigson may regret letting strong safety **Antoine Bethea** leave for the 49ers. While it's understandable that the GM didn't want to pay a nine-year veteran $21 million over four years, Bethea is only 30 (and a young 30; his birthday is July 27), and he had shown no signs of decline. In fact, after Robert Mathis and formidable man-to-man corner Vontae Davis, Bethea was the team's third-most valuable defender in 2013. Now in Bethea's stead is 33-year-old **Mike Adams**, who's intelligent and versatile (and much cheaper) but who's also a journeyman because of his limited physical tools. If inside linebacker **D'Qwell Jackson**, signed from the Browns, doesn't prosper in Indianapolis, then the defense up the middle could be very weak. And Jackson might well struggle, given that he and returning starter **Jerrell Freeman** both depend on being kept clean from blockers—which is difficult for any D-line to accomplish. This defense could be weak up the middle.

THE CASE FOR Defensive end Arthur Jones

In 2012 the Colts signed veteran free agent Cory Redding to a three-year, $10.5 million contract and got the high-energy, savvy defensive end they expected. In '13 they signed 49ers backup end Ricky Jean Francois to a four-year, $22 million deal, and so far they've gotten their money's worth. And this year they signed Ravens end Arthur Jones for $33 million over five years, hoping to get more playmaking up front. Jones, as Redding did, brings experience in a 3-4/4-3 hybrid scheme similar to Chuck Pagano's in Indy. Those multifarious concepts demand much from the ends—more so this year because of questions at nosetackle, where '12 fifth-round pick Josh Chapman could start for the first time. **Jones's arrival has taken on greater importance** now that reigning NFL sack leader Robert Mathis (19½) will miss the first four games after a failed PED test (which he has blamed on a doctor-prescribed fertility medication). In his absence at outside linebacker, the Colts will rely on the thoroughly average Erik Walden and unimpressive '13 first-round pick Bjoern Werner. Which means that Jones, the latest end addition, will also be their best chance to create disruption in the opponents' backfield.

OLB **JADEVEON CLOWNEY**

12

HOUSTON TEXANS

Worst to first in the division? Not without more big-impact plays from some of their big-name defenders

AFC SOUTH

We hear all the time about big-play offenses. But how about big-play defenses? Typically, those are the product of high-risk, high-reward schemes like those implemented by the Saints several seasons ago under Gregg Williams or, to a lesser degree, Dom Capers's Packers.

The Texans are positioned to be a big-play defense through more ideal means: sheer star power. And that represents their best chance at getting out of the AFC South basement under new coach Bill O'Brien.

NFL fans are already familiar with one of Houston's star defenders. End J.J. Watt is not just the best D-lineman in football, he's the best defensive player. Period. Despite facing constant double teams on the strong side (that is, across from an offensive tackle and tight end), Watt has 31 sacks and 23 pass deflections over the past two seasons. His penetration and powerful readjustments in traffic have also created countless other opportunities for teammates. Prime example: Five of Watt's pass deflections the last two years have resulted in interceptions.

Hoping to nab another once-in-a-generation defensive talent, Houston used the No. 1 pick in this year's draft on Jadeveon Clowney. The outside linebacker from South Carolina does not quite possess the quick twitch and natural bend of most elite pass rushers, but his power and speed off his second and third steps can be surreal. The concerns about Clowney pertain more to his character and drive. If he can't get up for playing alongside Watt and for esteemed position coach Bill Kollar, he can't get up for anything.

Watt isn't the only one who'll be pushing Clowney. Inside linebacker Brian Cushing is a high-octane

KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 2–14

WEEK 1

WAS

OAK

NYG

BUF

DAL

IND THUR

PIT MON

TEN

PHI

BYE

CLE

CIN

TEN

JAX

IND

BAL

JAX

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

player and possesses a tremendous on-field IQ. Before missing the majority of the past two seasons with devastating left-knee injuries, he was also one of the most explosive downhill attackers in the game—something that showed not just in his run pursuit but also in his blitzing. Still only 27 and a workout warrior, he's capable of reclaiming his place among the elite at his position.

Making big plays consistently requires the support of a quality secondary. Cornerback Johnathan Joseph is capable of shadowing No. 1 receivers and has a sense for undercutting routes when the ball's in the air. At strong safety D.J. Swearinger is by no means a star; he has a tendency to miss tackles and lose poise. But the second-round pick from 2013 does bring an intriguing array of skills, including the ability—at 5' 10", 208 pounds—to cover tight ends man-to-man. Swearinger was exploited early last season but showed significant improvement in November and December.

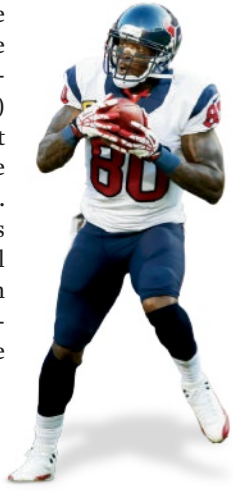
Any defense, big-play-oriented or not, can only be as good as its ability to stop long plays. And here the Texans face a few concerns. Up front, opposite Watt, they'll count on career backups Tim Jamison and Jared Crick to fill the sizable shoes of gap-shooting veteran end Antonio Smith, who signed with the Raiders. That's a downgrade in raw talent, and it's uncertain whether either replacement can maintain the tenacity he's shown in relief while playing more snaps.

Opposite Clowney at outside linebacker, Whitney Mercilus (the fourth first-round pick in coordinator Romeo Crennel's front seven) has flashed brilliance but must live up to his surname and make a greater impact down to down. Mercilus has a burst but suffers from tentativeness at times. He'll line up alongside Brooks Reed, an outside 'backer (and college defensive end) who may move to the inside, where he'll have to adapt his mechanics and diagnostics.

On the back end the Texans lack depth behind Kendrick Lewis and Chris Clemons (mundane safeties both) and corners Kareem Jackson (improved, but almost strictly a boundary player) and Brandon Harris (who can only play the slot). That means Crennel lacks the luxury of coverage flexibility that his predecessor, Wade Phillips, enjoyed.

Crennel is also unlikely to have a well-rested group; Houston's offense won't control the tempo as effectively as it has in years past. Under O'Brien the Texans have shifted away from their zone-running, play-action system, and the new Patriots-style scheme will have to operate with questions at several receiving spots as well as at quarterback. New starter Ryan Fitzpatrick is in a strong position to learn O'Brien's system, having played for four teams and started 77 games in his nine-year career. But his aggressive style of play will present more cons than pros.

With this in mind, Crennel may feel obligated to pursue big plays through schematic gambles. But if the Texans are to climb back out of the AFC South basement, a few star defenders must make magic on their own. □



ED ZURGA/AP

FOCUS ON The backfield

The man quarterbacking Bill O'Brien's new offense, **Ryan Fitzpatrick**, is a boom-or-bust, 31-year-old journeyman who tends to lose sense of a play's structure and who throws balls into tighter coverage than his arm strength should dictate. While those gambles sometimes pay off, they're not a good fit for a scheme built on disciplined timing and reading option routes. For stability, this attack will have to rely on **Arian Foster** and the ground game. Foster battled back problems last season, but he insists they were less severe than they sound. At just 28 he should regain the fluidity—uncommon for a 6' 1" 227-pounder—that he has shown in the past and once again contend for the AFC rushing title. Soft-handed, he'll also play a larger role in Houston's passing game, acting as a steadying force. O'Brien will implore Fitzpatrick to lean on him.

THE CASE FOR Receiver Andre Johnson

During the past six months the 12th-year veteran—and likely future Hall of Famer—has voiced his displeasure over Houston's retooling and history of mediocrity. But ultimately a $10 million salary for 2014 made it worth reporting for duty. And **Johnson remains more than capable of playing the role of a true No. 1 target.** While he may have lost the elite speed that put him in football's upper echelon, he still knows how to get open. And at his position, speed is less important than people think because a receiver can dictate the pace of play. Johnson might run a beat slower, but opponents still have to react to him. And with a knack for disguising routes and redirecting late in a pattern while tracking the ball, Johnson makes reacting difficult. That's how he was able to rack up 1,407 yards in '13, despite a carousel at QB, and 1,598 the year before that. The Texans need another big year out of Johnson because they lack depth at the position. And depending on how third-round rookie C.J. Fiedorowicz (Iowa) develops, they could be thin at tight end. The upside: Young receivers DeAndre Hopkins, Keshawn Martin and DeVier Posey can learn from one of the alltime best.

QB **JAKE LOCKER**

3

TENNESSEE TITANS

No matter who ends up taking the snaps, the team will have to mask its weakness at quarterback to succeed

AFC SOUTH

Given the pass-happy nature of today's NFL, the last thing a team wants to do is hide its quarterback. But if you have an unrefined or undependable player under center, that's your only chance to be competitive.

Such is the lot of the 2014 Titans, who will start either Jake Locker or rookie Zach Mettenberger. Locker, entering his fourth season but with just 18 career starts because of myriad injuries—including a right hip last season, followed by a right Lisfranc—has good mobility but is still a primitive decision-maker whose mechanics are a work in progress. Mettenberger, a traditional drop-back pocket passer out of LSU, wasn't drafted until the sixth round, but he might be the better fit in new coach Ken Whisenhunt's system.

Whoever starts in Week 1 is by no means a lock to hold the job. But with either quarterback, Whisenhunt will have to do what he failed to do a few years ago in Arizona, after Kurt Warner retired: Amend his scheme to compensate for his signal-caller's limitations.

So how do you "hide" a quarterback? You can't simply stop throwing the ball. (The Tim Tebow–led Broncos of 2011 tried that, but even they wound up taking to the air in crucial moments late in games.) You can, however, be more selective about when you throw.

The best time to throw is on first down, when defenses are geared up to stop the run and are most susceptible to the quarterback-hiding tactic of play-action. Because the QB turns his back to the defense while faking the handoff, he can't read the entire field when he looks back around. Bodies have shifted; he needs time to reassess. Therefore he is asked to read only one side of the field (usually whatever

WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES

side the run fake went toward). If the primary target isn't open, the next option is to check down to that side. Simple stuff. Quarterbacks who aren't comfortable with making even two reads tend to run more, especially if they're mobile (like Locker).

Another quarterback-hiding maneuver is rolling the pocket. This also slices the field in half while nullifying most pass-rushing concepts, which are built around attacking a quarterback's straight drop-back. Tennessee will move the pocket often if Locker is in. If it's Mettenberger, who does straight drop-backs, more of the quarterback-hiding ploys will involve screens—either slow-developing ones to running backs or quicker ones to wide receivers.

Short catch-and-run routes are also helpful; they create simple either/or reads. This is a tactic the Titans will definitely deploy because they have several receivers who excel at screens and shallow crosses. Their most talented wideout, second-year man Justin Hunter, is a downfield playmaker who's trying to refine his underneath game, but the rest of the group is already there. Nate Washington is cerebral, and third-year pro Kendall Wright offers superb short-area quickness and body control. There's also utilityman Dexter McCluster, a free-agent pickup who was regularly used on the move in Kansas City. And before coming to Nashville last year, tight end Delanie Walker, who will shoulder a larger role in Whisenhunt's system, was an excellent multitooled weapon in a 49ers offense that had to hide its quarterback often.

Walker's versatility extends to run blocking, and the ground game will obviously be essential for sustaining drives. Walker is savvy enough to dictate the entire run-blocking structure with his reads and movement. Blocking is especially important because unless second-round rookie Bishop Sankey from Washington erupts out of the gate, the Titans' lead back will be the methodical veteran Shonn Greene.

At least they've invested in blockers. Last season it was at guard, with Andy Levitre signing for $46.8 million over six years and Chance Warmack being drafted 10th. This season it's at tackle. Former Raven Michael Oher signed for $20 million over four years, most likely not knowing that the club would also use the 11th pick on Michigan's Taylor Lewan, who may start ahead of Oher in 2014 before eventually replacing sound-but-declining left tackle Michael Roos in '15. (In training camp, however, Lewan served as Roos's backup.)

As critical as this O-line's run blocking is to the ground game, it's perhaps more important to the passing attack. After all, what really drives quarterback-hiding tactics such as play-action, rolled pockets and screens is a line's cohesion and movement. If the Titans' front five doesn't come together, their quarterbacks will *really* need help. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 7–9

WEEK 1

KC
DAL
CIN
IND
CLE
JAX
WAS
HOU
BYE
BAL
PIT (MON)
PHI
HOU
NYG
NYJ
JAX (THUR)
IND

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

JOSHUA WEISBERG/ICON SMI

FOCUS ON Coverage

New defensive coordinator Ray Horton has prospered with his scheme in part because he's had preeminent one-on-one cover cornerbacks in Patrick Peterson (Arizona) and Joe Haden (Cleveland). The closest thing the Titans had to that was Alterraun Verner, but he left for the Buccaneers in free agency. Tennessee's top-paid corner, **Jason McCourty**, has actually developed nicely since being selected in the sixth round out of Rutgers in 2009. But McCourty is most comfortable as an off-man defender serving as part of a scheme, not as its backbone. He'll have to be the backbone this year, however, because across from him is **Coty Sensabaugh**, whose experience is primarily in the slot. Horton has two solid safeties in **Michael Griffin** (more of a coverage guy) and **Bernard Pollard** (a box hitter), but the coordinator will be constricted in how he uses them unless the corners develop.

THE CASE FOR Defensive tackle Jurrell Casey

With the Bengals' Geno Atkins injured in Week 9, Casey, a third-round pick in 2011 and a starter since Day One, was the best one-gap defensive tackle in the AFC last year. Casey's mix of initial quickness, second effort and technique was destructive week in and week out—and a rarity for any 300-plus-pounder. **He now has to mind two gaps, not just one, under new coordinator Ray Horton**, who is shifting the Titans from a 4-3 to a 3-4. Casey will play the hybrid five-technique, the position at which Horton's former disciple, Darnell Dockett, excelled in Arizona. Needing to match Dockett's sensational lateral movement in traffic, Casey shed 15 pounds this off-season. He'll be key in a pass rush that is built not on edge rushers—though Tennessee has several, none has the speed to make offenses alter their protection—but on aggressive blitz designs. Horton's array of pressure packages might be the richest and most creative in all of football. Those packages are most relevant on third-and-long, of course, and for a defense to get to that down and distance, it must first stop the run. Whether that happens depends on how quickly Casey and his fellow Tennessee defensive linemen learn to play two gaps.

DE **RED BRYANT**

4

SOUTH

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Through coaches, free agents and draft picks, the defense is being remade in the Seahawks' image

Distinctively mustached owner Shahid Khan and young second-year GM Dave Caldwell seem intent on turning their club into the Seahawks of the Southeast. They began by hiring Seattle defensive coordinator Gus Bradley as coach a year ago. The 48-year-old Bradley, who shares Pete Carroll's effervescence and optimism, also has his former boss's taste for physical yet zone-oriented defense.

The scheme, being so straightforward, is not difficult to teach; the challenge is finding the players to execute it. Bradley doesn't have anywhere near the talent now that he had with the Seahawks, though Caldwell did sign a pair of free-agent defensive ends from the Super Bowl champs. Red Bryant, one of the best two-gap run defenders in the league, will start on the weak side. At 6' 3" and 254 pounds, the sinewy Chris Clemons will push for double-digit sacks while subbing for Bryant on passing downs.

Both are substantial upgrades and will help address the greatest difference between the two defenses: their four-man pass rushes. The Seahawks have an effective one, the Jags do not. Even with Clemons they are short an edge-bender on the other side. Andre Branch, a 2012 second-round pick, was supposed to be that guy, but aside from the occasional splash, he hasn't shown much. Strongside defensive end Tyson Alualu can make noise as an interior rusher in nickel, but he's not the sort of force that keeps offensive line coaches up at night.

Another major difference is between the two secondaries. Seattle's defense relies on the

DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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AN INSIDE LOOK AT

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range of free safety Earl Thomas and the physicality of strong safety Kam Chancellor. Another former Seahawk, Winston Guy, is playing the role of Thomas. He doesn't have the All-Pro's range, but he's familiar with the scheme. In Chancellor's spot is Johnathan Cyprien, the 33rd pick in 2013, from Florida International, who like Evans is still learning to read the field. Cyprien defended tight ends man-to-man at times as a rookie, and his assertiveness, if harnessed, can make him a force in the box.

Fortunately for the young safeties, field awareness can be taught and learned. What can't be taught is size and length—key traits for a Seahawks-style cornerback. At 5' 11" and 201 pounds, 2013 third-round pick Dwayne Gratz—who was the third rookie in Jacksonville's starting back four last year—is lacking in these departments. However, Gratz has a knack for jamming receivers in the first five yards and pressing after that. He might be better suited long-term for the slot, but this defense was noticeably stingier when he started outside opposite veteran Alan Ball last season. Ball is back, as is versatile eighth-year corner Will Blackmon.

In between the front line and secondary, the Jags do have Seahawks-type speed in linebackers Paul Posluszny and Geno Hayes, two refined downhill attackers. They also have run defenders up front who can keep these backers clean. Besides Bryant at defensive end, sixth-year defensive tackle Sen'Derrick Marks (the three technique) offers wonderful quickness and athletic twitch, while cohort Roy Miller (the nose shade) flashes good initial movement for a rotund 6' 2" 310-pounder.

The Seahawks last year had a league-best 39 takeaways; Jacksonville a ho-hum 21. In Year 2 under Bradley, the Jaguars will have to force more turnovers, if not through faster play then by taking more chances with blitzes and coverage changeups—tactics Bradley normally reserved for third-and-short.

Jacksonville will need the defense to deliver big plays because the offense is unlikely to create many. While the additions of quarterback Blake Bortles, the No. 3 pick out of Central Florida, and second-round rookie receivers Marqise Lee and Allen Robinson should help a passing attack that was impotent last year, the real payout on those choices may not come until 2015 (or later), as Bradley and his staff claim to be leery of rushing youngsters into action.

That's their stance heading into the season, but coaches have a way of changing their minds in September. When the games start counting, Bradley could at some point find himself applying the Seattle blueprint to his offense as well and going with an inexperienced quarterback—No 3 pick Blake Bortles over Chad Henne. That will work only if the defense is stingy. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 4-12

WEEK 1
PHI
WAS
IND
SD
PIT
TEN
CLE
MIA
CIN
LONDON DAL
BYE
IND
NYG
HOU
BAL
THUR TEN
HOU
WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

THE BIG FIX The receivers

Spending second-round picks on **Marqise Lee** (USC) and **Allen Robinson** (Penn State) was a welcome move in Jacksonville, if for no other reason than the Jags might finally have receivers who can get free from man coverage. Last year, with Justin Blackmon suspended, **Cecil Shorts** was the top target. While Shorts can make the occasional big play, on most teams he'd be the first receiver off the bench. The Jaguars also have undrafted third-year pro **Mike Brown**, who is cerebral in the slot and has a good sense for throttling down in vacant zone areas. He can be effective on crossing patterns—which coordinator Jedd Fisch's up-tempo system should start featuring regularly, given that the speedy Lee and the brawny Robinson run well after the catch. Complementing all these wideouts is **Marcedes Lewis**, a 6' 6", 272-pound tight end who can high-point the ball, though he must develop better hands. It's a group in need of help, which may have just arrived.

THE CASE FOR Guard Zane Beadles

GM Dave Caldwell possibly have overpaid just a hair in giving the former Broncos left guard a five-year, $30 million contract ($12.5 million guaranteed), but anyone who watched Jacksonville's interior linemen a year ago can't blame him. Their lack of power derailed the Jaguars' running game, and pass protection was rife with individual breakdowns. Beadles **will be a dramatic upgrade simply by not stinking**. At right guard the hope is that third-round rookie Brandon Linder, who is expected to start on the other side of questionable center Mike Brewster, can also reach that low bar. The 6' 4", 305-pound Beadles moves well in his run blocking—a talent shared on this O-line only by second-year left tackle Luke Joeckel, the No. 2 pick of 2013, who fractured his right ankle last October. Most of the rushing concepts will be built around these left-side linemen, either through pull blocks, reach-and-seal zone blocks or just straight-ahead plowing. New starting running back Toby Gerhart possesses only limited lateral quickness and agility, so for the Jags' ground game to go anywhere, it'll need superior blocking. At least Beadles gives them a fighting chance.

DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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OT **RYAN CLADY**

1

DENVER BRONCOS

Forget the defensive upgrades. With better receivers, this offense has a chance to outperform last year's

AFC WEST

Seattle's demolition of the Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII cast a pall over all that their offense had accomplished. Denver had a historically prolific regular season—Peyton Manning's 55 touchdowns, the offense's 457.3 yards per game—and one of the greatest performances ever in the AFC championship, against the Patriots (507 total yards, with 400 from Manning on 32 completions). But the 43–8 rout by the Seahawks showed that significant upgrades had to be made.

Most of the headlines in Denver this off-season were about the signings made on defense—end DeMarcus Ware, cornerback Aqib Talib, strong safety T.J. Ward—to strengthen a unit that will also benefit from the return of star linebacker Von Miller, who missed 10 games last year, including Week 17 and the postseason, because of a torn right ACL. But equally important are the adjustments that the Broncos made to their offensive juggernaut.

The Seahawks exposed the difficulty that Denver's wide receivers had in separating from press coverage. While Pro Bowler Demaryius Thomas didn't struggle in that area, counterpart Eric Decker absolutely did. And slot maestro Wes Welker, at 5' 9" and 185 pounds, has never been great at shaking free from physical defenders; his game is predicated on avoiding contact, which dovetails with Denver's system, full of natural rub and pick routes.

Still, every game has critical moments when a receiver must simply line up and win. Decker failed too often to deliver, which is why general manager John Elway allowed him to walk and—for about half the $36.25 million

CHRISTOPHER SZAGOLA/CSM

that Decker cost the Jets—signed Emmanuel Sanders. At 5' 11" and 180 pounds, the former Steeler can't necessarily shed a corner's physical jam either, but he has the multidirectional quickness to evade it. With Manning, Sanders will be a star. The Broncos also invested a second-round pick in Cody Latimer out of Indiana, who will have the luxury of learning as a reserve early in his career.

While Manning's Colts were known for their static formations and rote but well-practiced play designs, these Broncos are noted for their array of different packages. Their three-receiver base package aligns players in all different spots. Julius Thomas, a fourth-year pro but only second-year contributor, is the catalyst for this. At 6' 5" and 250 pounds and possessing solid speed plus great body control, Thomas is the toughest athletic matchup at his position beside Jimmy Graham.

Last season offensive coordinator Adam Gase designed shrewd plays that had Thomas lined up by himself on the weak side of Denver's staple 3×1 sets, which put all three wideouts on the same side as a way of confounding zone principles or creating favorable matchups against man-to-man. Gase plans on featuring Thomas even more this season, with 3×1 being just one element of the equation.

Up front the line has been reconfigured. Right tackle Orlando Franklin had problems with nearly everyone who lined up across from him last season, but now that Pro Bowl left tackle Ryan Clady is back from a left Lisfranc injury, replacement Chris Clark can shift to right tackle, where he'll warm the seat for the prospective long-term solution, third-round rookie Michael Schofield. Franklin, meanwhile, will move inside and take a shot at replacing departed left guard Zane Beadles.

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 13-3

WEEK 1

IND
KC
SEA
BYE
ARI
NYJ
SF
SD THUR
NE
OAK
STL
MIA
KC
BUF
SD
CIN MON
OAK

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

These changes may not rectify all the O-line weaknesses, but the Broncos don't need perfection there. Manning, with his pocket mobility and quick decision-making, merely requires an offensive line that won't self-destruct.

Manning's most overlooked attribute is his savvy in audibling into running plays. If he sees two high safeties—which happens often, given defenses' reluctance to blitz him—he'll check to a run that gives his back a blocking advantage. This year that back will be 2013 second-rounder Montee Ball, taking the place of the more well-rounded but less dynamic Knowshon Moreno, who was not re-signed and joined Miami.

The Broncos wouldn't turn to Ball if they didn't believe he would improve in the passing game. Blitz pickup is a learning process for most young backs, and with Manning's predilection for making use of all eligible targets, Ball will have to excel as a short-yardage receiver as well. After all, he's playing in an offense that was the most prolific ever, and now must be even better. □

FOCUS ON Stopping the run

While injuries led to instability down the stretch last year for Denver's pass coverage, its run defense was stellar, even though the front seven was also dealing with serious losses. In addition to missing sturdy edge-setter and backside chaser Von Miller, there were injuries to high-octane lineman Derek Wolfe (spinal cord) and gap-shooting tackle Kevin Vickerson (dislocated right hip). Still, over their final five games (including postseason), the Broncos yielded an average of just 83.0 yards on the ground. The biggest reason was **Terrance (Pot Roast) Knighton**. The beefy 6' 3", 335-pound nosetackle has remarkably light feet and can burst off blocks because of the favorable positioning he achieves with his quick first step. Another reason was **Sylvester Williams**, a 2013 first-round rookie tackle who improved as the season went on. With the rest of the front mostly healthy again, Williams and the 28-year-old Knighton (who is playing for a new contract) are primed for even better performances.

THE CASE FOR Strong safety T.J. Ward

The defense this year will feature the return of outside linebacker Von Miller from injury and the arrival of future Hall of Fame pass rusher DeMarcus Ware from Dallas. Also, the Broncos added former Patriots corner Aqib Talib, a 2013 Pro Bowler who excels in the man coverage that coach John Fox and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio have used regularly over the past two years. While Miller's return is significant, the two big-name free agents may not make as huge a difference as expected. Sure, both can be great, but Ware is replacing the reliable Shaun Phillips, while Talib succeeds Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, whom quarterbacks barely even threw at last season. **The unit's most significant upgrade is likely to be Ward**, who takes over a position that has been a revolving door in Denver for some time. The former Brown has always been a bone-rattling tackler, but where his value has really skyrocketed is in coverage. A borderline liability there early in his career, the 27-year-old Ward can now handle tight ends man-to-man, giving Fox and Del Rio flexibility with the rest of their coverages.

DOUG PENSINGER/GETTY IMAGES

CB **BRANDON FLOWERS**

12

SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

A defense that has been getting by on its schemes adds a key free agent and has impact players on the mend

AFC WEST

There's a truism in pro football: If you don't have good cornerbacks, you'd better have really good pass rushers, or vice versa. Without either you're usually on the fast track to a top 10 draft pick—unless you have an extraordinarily savvy defensive coordinator.

Game-planning and especially play-calling are talked about more with offenses, but the concepts are just as relevant on defense. Last season the Chargers' John Pagano was as crafty in these departments as any coordinator in the league.

Pagano, whom coach Mike McCoy retained from predecessor Norv Turner's staff, had neither quality corners nor quality pass rushers. The entire 2013 cast was underwhelming, except for versatile free safety Eric Weddle. But the 47-year-old Pagano seemed to know just what to call and when, and he rarely dialed up the same thing twice. This was a big reason the Chargers, who entered Week 14 with a 5–7 record, went on a five-game winning streak, including a playoff victory at Cincinnati in the wild-card round, before falling to a simply superior Broncos club.

While the Chargers run a 3–4 base defense, Pagano's creativity, like most coordinators', comes out in sub packages, mostly on third down. (Due to a shortage at linebacker last season, his sub package of choice was a three-safety dime instead of a traditional nickel.) In these, Pagano has a great feel for disguising coverages to take advantage of a quarterback's habits, and as the Bengals found out, he knows how to order blitzes and D-line stunts that exploit an offensive line's tendencies.

Now Pagano enters this year

ROD MAR FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

with quality pass rushers *and* corners. Veteran Dwight Freeney is looking to come back from a torn left quad muscle that ended his 2013 season in Week 4. Before the injury Freeney had regained his dominant form as a 3–4 outside linebacker, which, even after moving to that position in '12 with the Colts, is still a huge adjustment after 10 years as a 4–3 defensive end. At 34, there's no guarantee he can fully recover from such a significant injury, which is one reason second-year GM Tom Telesco drafted Jeremiah Attaochu out of Georgia Tech in the second round.

Also healthy is outside linebacker Melvin Ingram, who performed well after returning late last season from a torn left ACL he suffered in May OTAs. In addition to edge-rushing prowess, Ingram has the nimbleness to work through traffic against the run and the agility to drop back and cover the flats. Twelfth-year veteran Jarret Johnson is similarly resourceful (though less explosive), giving Pagano two players up front whom he can use creatively.

Sturdy outside run defenders operating behind high-quality defensive ends Kendall Reyes (a deft mover) and Corey Liuget (a forceful thumper) should keep lanes clean for inside linebackers Manti Te'o and Donald Butler against the run. Te'o is methodical—maybe even stiff—but Butler has shown playmaking ability, including against the pass.

At cornerback, the most critical upgrade is free agent Brandon Flowers (one year, $3 million with an extra $2 million in incentives), formerly of the Chiefs. Not only can he stymie quality receivers—a feat that his predecessor, Derek Cox, couldn't manage—but he can also do it in press-man coverage. That gives Pagano new options for how to use his linebackers and safeties in pass defense. Before signing Flowers in June, the Chargers spent a first-round pick on Jason Verrett of TCU, a mighty mite of a corner who has drawn comparisons to former Bill and Viking Antoine Winfield. The 5' 10", 178-pound Verrett will fill the increasingly important role of slot corner, while long-armed, 5' 11" Shareece Wright, who floundered before coming on strong down the stretch, will retain the No. 2 cornerback job.

The added firepower on defense should force more turnovers (the Chargers finished 30th last year in that category), which quarterback Philip Rivers should capitalize on consistently. After helping the defense late last year by going to more of a ball-control run offense, McCoy will likely revert to his quick-passing scheme. Many of the calls will be determined at the line, where Rivers has evolved into one of the smartest players in football. That he faces Pagano on weekdays no doubt has enhanced his education. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 9-7

WEEK 1

ARI MON

SEA

BUF

JAX

NYJ

OAK

KC

DEN THUR

MIA

BYE

OAK

STL

BAL

NE

DEN

SF SAT

KC

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

GREGORY BULL/AP

FOCUS ON Space men

With an offensive line that is extremely average, it makes sense that coach **Mike McCoy** will get away from the methodical rushing attack he leaned on late in 2013 and go back to his preferred fast-clip, pass-oriented offense, which lessens the importance of the front five. Two players that give McCoy great flexibility in such a scheme are 6' 6", 240-pound tight end **Ladarius Green** and 5' 8", 200-pound running back **Danny Woodhead**. Green, a fourth-round pick in 2012, has just 21 career catches to his name but has been called by Rivers the fastest player on the team, a rarity for a tight end. His ability to line up anywhere will generate mismatches in his favor—or perhaps in Woodhead's favor, since the attention paid to Green and tight end Antonio Gates creates space out of the backfield or on shallow routes out wide. Woodhead knows how to work those openings. Last year he had 76 receptions, making him second by one to the Saints' Pierre Thomas for the most by a running back.

THE CASE FOR Receiver Keenan Allen

Antonio Gates has long been Philip Rivers's favorite target, and even though he's 34, the eight-time Pro Bowl tight end is still the focus of most defenses' double teams. But even as Gates continues to be a superb box-out and on-the-move receiver, Allen, a 2013 third-round pick who probably would have been selected in round 1 if he'd entered the draft with a healthy left knee, **will become Rivers's top target**. As a rookie Allen became the go-to guy in pivotal moments. He has superb fundamentals, including nuanced route running, which meshes well with the anticipation passing of Rivers. The 6' 2", 211-pound Allen is not physically imposing, but he moves better than corners expect, and he has sharp instincts, which expands his catching radius. Allen stands out in a receiving group that has willowy deep threat Malcom Floyd, who in his 10th season is hoping to come back from a career-threatening neck injury; Vincent Brown, who's just a little too swift to call a mere possession receiver; and diminutive veteran slot man Eddie Royal. Both Brown and Royal could again catch 40 or so balls—but expect Allen to more than match their combined receptions.

RB JAMAAL CHARLES

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

3

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

With a dearth of weapons, they must manufacture offense. Which is where play design and a gifted back come in

AFC WEST

To define a player's value, simply ask: How much does he factor into his team's wins? By this measure the most valuable nonquarterback in today's NFL could very well be Chiefs running back Jamaal Charles.

Kansas City went 11–5 last season despite having a defense that faded in the second half of the year and an offense that, in terms of raw talent, ranked in the bottom quarter of the league. On offense the same uninspiring group returns this year—only with less experience up front after the free-agency departures of left tackle Branden Albert and guards Jon Asamoah and Geoff Schwartz.

Still, the Chiefs made the 2013 playoffs, thanks to Charles and to coach Andy Reid's ability to manufacture offense. "Manufacture" is a short way of saying that Reid gets production out of players who cannot conjure it on their own. They're at the mercy of the play design, and fortunately for them, they're working for a cagey architect.

Reid depends heavily on leveraging Charles—the league's touchdown leader (19) in 2013 and the one Chief who can create his own opportunities. This shows up best in the screen game, with Charles coming out of the backfield. K.C. has also had success with screens to wide receivers and tight ends, often because defenses are keying on Charles. The common element in all the screens is misdirection. The plays begin with an aggressive flow one way before winding back to the other side, where space has been created. Reid loves this tactic, especially in the red zone, where room is tight.

His other methods of manufactured offense include play-action

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2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 11–5

WEEK 1

TEN
DEN
MIA
NE (MON)
SF
BYE
SD
STL
NYJ
BUF
SEA
OAK (THUR)
DEN
ARI
OAK
PIT
SD

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

passing (especially on early-down deep shots), rolled pockets (which can also involve misdirection) and other plays with sharply defined either/or reads for the quarterback. Reid will continue to operate this way with the meager-armed Alex Smith, whose field-reading abilities do not quite correlate with his off-field intelligence. As a decision-maker, Smith (now in his second year with the Chiefs after seven bumpy seasons in San Francisco) is slow and resoundingly cautious. Rarely does he pull the trigger on downfield or even intermediate-length throws, and he's not asked to execute many multiprogression dropback reads.

Not that Smith would have great-looking reads available anyway, because his receivers all have limitations. For Dwayne Bowe the issue is speed. For Donnie Avery it's strength and surehandedness. For A.J. Jenkins it's experience—which, given that he was the 49ers' first-round pick in 2012 before being traded to the Chiefs last year, means he's also shown other limitations in practice. By not signing a free agent of note or selecting from a deep pool of rookie receivers in the draft, Reid and GM John Dorsey are leaning heavily on the coach's ability to create schemes that will get guys open—or, given Smith's limitations, wide open.

One potential weapon, at least, is tight end Travis Kelce, a 2013 third-round pick out of Cincinnati who is coming off knee surgery that wiped out virtually his entire rookie season. While veteran Anthony Fasano is the short-receiving option, the 6' 5", 260-pound Kelce will be asked to provide an interior vertical element in the passing game out of two-tight-end sets. If Kelce can effectively move around the formation (including off presnap motion), Reid will have more ways to create misdirection.

Included in those misdirection designs will be speedy De'Anthony Thomas (4.50 in the 40), a fourth-round choice out of Oregon, who will fill Dexter McCluster's old gadget role. McCluster, who signed with the Titans, was more of a receiver who could also play running back. Thomas is more of a running back who can also play receiver. To get Thomas meaningful reps, the Chiefs may have to keep last year's talented third-round pick Knile Davis on the bench more than they'd like. At least they have the resources to allow Charles, 27, to take more breathers.

While Kansas City's defense has more talent, this blitz-heavy unit also depends a great deal on designs for its success. But what happens when opponents figure out those designs? In the first half of last season the defense allowed the fourth-fewest yards in the NFL. In the second half it allowed the most. That's the scary part about relying on schemes: The puzzles can be solved. Which is why exceptional talents like Charles are so valuable. □

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/TUSP/AP

MAJOR CONCERN Pass defense

Kansas City's defense collapsed in the second half last year as offenses began to figure out its blitzes. In fairness, those designs also became less potent with star edge rusher **Justin Houston** battling injuries. But as the pressure lessened, quarterbacks had more time to throw and the Chiefs' man-to-man coverage cracked. Not only were more passes being completed against them, but they also missed more tackles. There's no promise that things will get better for the K.C. secondary in 2014. Top corner Brandon Flowers was released in a cost-cutting move, meaning that 2013 seventh-rounder **Marcus Cooper** will be starting opposite **Sean Smith**. Cooper ran hot and cold as a rookie. Like Smith, he has little experience playing inside, which limits K.C.'s flexibility in coverage. Filling the inside duties will be either mediocre veteran pickup **Chris Owens** or third-round rookie **Phillip Gaines** (Rice).

THE CASE FOR Strong safety Eric Berry

Early in his career 2010 first-round pick Berry had a glaring weakness: man coverage. But after getting torched by tight ends in '12, Berry dedicated his off-season to improving that aspect of his game. In '13, not only did he take on tight ends in man-to-man, but he also often stifled them—including top players like Dallas's Jason Witten and Cleveland's Jordan Cameron. As good as the 6-foot, 211-pound Berry is now in coverage, **he makes an even bigger difference as a linebacker**, where he's heady against the run and dangerous on blitzes. Berry actually lined up at linebacker more often than at strong safety last year because of his role in coordinator Bob Sutton's dime package. By putting six defensive backs around rangy linebacker Derrick Johnson, Sutton's D had immense speed across the board, lending great unpredictability to Kansas City's blitzes. With athletic nosetackle Dontari Poe able to stay on the field in dime situations (which is remarkable for a 346-pounder), the Chiefs had an interior force who could create blitz angles. This helped propel them to the playoffs. It couldn't have happened without Berry.

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Microsoft

QB **DEREK CARR**

4

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

OAKLAND RAIDERS

The choices at quarterback illustrate the dilemma of a team that's rebuilding but also wants to win now

AFC WEST

The Raiders, a once-proud franchise with three Super Bowl wins in five appearances, have been in free fall for 11 years and counting because Hall of Fame owner Al Davis lost his touch. He made blunder after blunder (drafting JaMarcus Russell and throwing money at a damaged Javon Walker are among the lowlights) and had too little patience (from 2002 no coach lasted three seasons). After Davis's death in '11, the hope was that his son, Mark—who, upon inheriting the team, made it clear that, unlike his father, he's not a football guy—would bring more patience and calm to the organization.

But the Raiders' ship has been slow to right—and understandably so. When general manager Reggie McKenzie and coach Dennis Allen arrived in 2012, the team was an absolute mess. Yet even though this is only the second year they've had high draft picks to use (the Raiders had traded several from '12) and this is the first year they've had salary-cap space (they inherited more than $55 million in dead money on the books from bad signings), there's already a sense that McKenzie and Allen are fighting for their jobs.

McKenzie's roster overhaul last year created $64 million in fresh cap room headed into this off-season, though a leaguewide jump in the cap helped make at least a dozen other teams strong players in the free-agent market. If the money is equal, players choose their destination based on a team's other qualities, and that's where the Raiders, with their run-down stadium and recent performance history, lose out.

McKenzie, like his mentor, venerated Packers GM Ted Thompson, believes that quality teams are

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 4–12

WEEK 1

NYJ

HOU

NE

LONDON MIA

BYE

SD

ARI

CLE

SEA

DEN

SD

THUR KC

STL

SF

KC

BUF

DEN

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

built through the draft. But with so many gaping holes to fill and pressure from ownership to show immediate improvement, he has had to sign veterans as temporary fixes. Last season he brought in nine new starters on defense. This year that same unit is getting six new starters, including four veterans signed for two years or less. None of them are marquee guys.

The offense will also have at least six and possibly eight new starters, including the man taking snaps—either 2014 second-round pick Derek Carr, from Fresno State, or 11th-year veteran Matt Schaub, cast off by the Texans. The dilemma at quarterback will carry on throughout the season and perfectly illustrates the consequences of impatient ownership. Instead of giving Carr the time he needs to develop, the coaches will feel the need to start Schaub, knowing they can't afford a third straight year of 4–12 (even if those records are a fair reflection of the personnel they were given). Because if Carr were to struggle, chances are good that the staff will have simply initiated his development for the benefit of the next regime. A "win now" (or "just win, baby" as Al liked to say) approach is often a good thing, but for a franchise unmistakably at the outset of a long rebuilding process, that attitude will undoubtedly result in more long-term mediocrity.

Regardless of who is under center, the Raiders now at least have the resources to be competitive offensively, which wasn't the case last year. Up front, the free-agent signings of left tackle Donald Penn and right guard Austin Howard will help plug what has been a porous line. Still, Penn and his new bookend, right tackle Menelik Watson, will need support in pass protection. Watson is gifted but incredibly green. At guard, utility man Khalif Barnes is likely just keeping the seat warm for rookie Gabe Jackson (Mississippi State). Whoever is there, the Raiders need more cohesive run-blocking around fourth-year center Stefen Wisniewski.

Taking advantage of that run blocking will be free-agent pickup Maurice Jones-Drew. At 29, the former Jaguar and 2011 rushing champ is not much better than the man he's replacing, departed free agent Rashad Jennings (Giants), though he will be an upgrade as a pass catcher. Fragile returnee Darren McFadden won't improve matters either; he doesn't have the lateral dexterity to create his own yards, though he can still explode downhill if given daylight.

In the passing game, free-agent wideout James Jones must go from being a No. 3 receiver in Green Bay to a No. 1 in Oakland. Jones will have some help if lanky and acrobatic playmaker Andre Holmes, 26, builds off the promise he showed in 2013. But with the rest of the receivers unable to consistently beat man coverage and the tight ends giving defenses little to fear, that's a lot of pressure on Jones and Holmes. Though it's nothing compared with the stress on the men above them. □

THE BIG FIX The defensive front

With a collection of backups turned starters, the Raiders' defensive line last season eroded down the stretch. It wasn't the most talented group to begin with, which is why GM Reggie McKenzie has revamped it for a second straight year. To replace the departed Lamarr Houston, he signed ex-Giant defensive end **Justin Tuck** and ex-Steeler linebacker **LaMarr Woodley** to two-year deals. They may be in decline, but neither is completely washed up. More potent is 32-year-old tackle **Antonio Smith**, brought over from Houston to provide penetration inside. One reason the Raiders have to be so creative and aggressive with blitzes is that their O-line hasn't been intimidating anyone with its rush. Changing that requires great speed off the edge, which Tuck and Woodley don't have. **Khalil Mack** does, though. If the No. 5 pick out of Buffalo can excel as a third-down edge rusher, this group could give Oakland the improvement it has been seeking.

THE CASE FOR Free safety Charles Woodson

Woodson, who is 37 and has said he is open to playing beyond this season, may no longer be the All-Pro that he was in Green Bay, but the veteran is a perfect fit for the system of Dennis Allen and coordinator Jason Tarver. Tarver, who directs most of the action, attacks offenses with blitzes from defensive backs, coverage rotations and presnap disguises, with many of the calls made on the field in response to how the offense lines up. Woodson, who can be brilliant at diagnosing plays in the box, **is just the kind of versatile chess piece Tarver needs**. So is hard-hitting safety Tyvon Branch, whose season-ending broken right leg in Week 2 deflated the defense last year. (Branch's replacement, Brandian Ross, was easily the worst defensive starter in the league last year; that he stayed on the field for Oakland speaks volumes about the team's lack of depth.) Then there's rookie Khalil Mack. No doubt the Raiders drafted the 6' 3", 251-pound outside linebacker to line up on the edge in passing situations and revive their pass rush. But Mack, like last year's third-round pick, Sio Moore, can play in space too. In this complex scheme, it will help that one of Mack's key mentors is a future Hall of Fame defensive back.

PAT LOVELL/USA TODAY SPORTS

Think about this: UV damage can cause eye diseases like macular degeneration and cataracts.

Eye diseases don't always exhibit symptoms until it's too late. Seeing your eye doctor for a yearly exam can detect and prevent them, if they are caught early enough.

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DE CEDRIC THORNTON

CHRIS HUMPHREYS/USA TODAY SPORTS

1

NFC EAST

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

The team known for putting up points—fast—has a versatile, deep defense that deserves attention too

The fascination with coach Chip Kelly's cutting-edge offense and the amazement over first-year starter Nick Foles's NFL-high passer rating (119.2) diverted attention from what actually drove the Eagles to the NFC East title last season: outstanding defense. Only two teams, the Vikings and the Saints, scored more than 22 points against Philadelphia after September.

In fact, of the two units, Philly's defense has the more diversified approach, fulfilling a mandate that Kelly (who's not a defensive guy) gave coordinator Billy Davis upon his hiring last year. Many of the offense's plays are essentially the same, just wrapped up in different looks. What Davis implemented is a hybrid scheme with a wealth of pass-rush concepts out of 3–4 and 4–3 fronts, as well as out of a nickel sub package. The idea is not just to get sacks—though the Eagles presumably hope to improve on their modest 37 takedowns from 2013—but rather to pressure QBs into bad decisions and errant throws.

In this respect the unit's performance was better than it may have seemed. Philly's pass defense allowed the most yards in the NFL, 289.8 per game, but that was the direct result of the offense's accelerated tempo, which put the D on the field for more snaps than any other team's: The Eagles faced a league-high average of 41.9 passes. In yards yielded per attempt, though, they ranked a far more respectable 19th (7.3 yards).

There's still room to improve, of course. And Philadelphia has the personnel to do so. Inside linebackers DeMeco Ryans, a sturdy run defender, and Mychal

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 10–6

WEEK 1

JAX

IND MON

WAS

SF

STL

NYG

BYE

ARI

HOU

CAR MON

GB

TEN

DAL THUR

SEA

DAL

WAS SAT

NYG

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

Kendricks, a developing cover guy, both blossomed as blitzers last season. They're joined by a collection of quality pass rushers: Trent Cole, who is 31 but can still play at a high level, thanks to a natural sense for leverage; Marcus Smith, a first-round pick out of Louisville; Brandon Graham, a vastly underappreciated rotational force who plays with a strong blend of speed and leverage; and Vinny Curry, a 2012 second-rounder with a surprising burst given his build (6' 3", 279 pounds).

Connor Barwin can ably rush the passer, too, but he's also tremendous at peeling out to handle running backs in coverage and at jamming tight ends or receivers off the line. That's crucial because one of Davis's core principles involves double-teaming an opponent's top receiver. To that end, Philadelphia signed Saints free agent Malcolm Jenkins to a bargain three-year, $15.5 million contract ($8.5 million guaranteed). The rangy free safety can patrol deep and, having entered the NFL as a first-round cornerback in 2009, is comfortable playing man coverage in the slot. If he does align there, it could be an indication of a blitz, something he thrived at under Rob Ryan last year. Coveragewise, the Eagles already have what might be the league's best young slot artist in Brandon Boykin.

At the corners, Bradley Fletcher and Cary Williams form the league's most improved tandem. Early last season those two played only in conservative off-man coverage, and offenses ate them up. But as time went on, they played more man-to-man looks. They thrived, which expanded the schematic possibilities for the rest of the unit.

In many respects a defense is only as good as its ability to stop the run, and here Philly can be stout, assuming Ryans and Kendricks are sharp behind what should be a disruptive front line. Many pundits expected 2012 first-round pick Fletcher Cox to emerge as the front's best defender. While he's shown flashes and been serviceable, he's failed to be the high-octane every-down force they expected. Cedric Thornton, an undrafted free agent out of Southern Arkansas in 2011, has actually been more impressive. Like so many other members of the Eagles' defensive-line rotation, Thornton can slide inside and play nosetackle (or shade off the nose), though he inflicts most of his damage from his natural five-technique (defensive end) spot, where he's beastly against the run.

Given Kelly's breakneck offensive pace, opponents often want to run the ball to rest their defense. And because of that, Thornton and Cox (plus ascending second-year nosetackle Bennie Logan) could determine how successful Philadelphia's D will be. With scheme diversity and depth at all three levels, expectations are high. □

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

FOCUS ON The offensive line

Want to know a big reason LeSean McCoy, the league's most agile runner, and Darren Sproles, a terrifying run-catch threat, will have big seasons? Because they play behind an offensive line that's perfectly suited to the Eagles' scheme. In a fast-paced, space-oriented system that relies on lateral movement to exploit the field's full 53⅓-yard width, you need mobile, athletic blockers. In those terms left tackle **Jason Peters** has long been one of the league's best. **Evan Mathis** became a top-shelf left guard because of his feet. Right guard **Todd Herremans** is not as agile but makes up for that with his savvy. Right tackle **Lane Johnson** spent two years playing tight end in college and was drafted with the No. 4 pick last year explicitly because of his raw athleticism. And in the middle of it all is **Jason Kelce**, who gets out in front on screens and elongated runs as effectively as any center in the game. McCoy and Sproles will be the ones collecting all of the fantasy points, but this fivesome deserves a high percentage of the credit.

THE CASE FOR Quarterback Nick Foles

The designation *system quarterback*, like *game manager*, has become a pejorative. But wouldn't it mean something to be the best system quarterback in the NFL? Entering his third season, Nick Foles has a chance to be exactly that, despite having only decent arm strength and a palpable discomfort throwing with bodies around him. His impressive 2013 numbers—a league-high 9.1 yards per attempt, along with **27 touchdowns and just two interceptions in 10 starts**—can be attributed largely to coach Chip Kelly's scheme. Being a great system QB obviously requires having a great system. Kelly, with his sense for field balance and for rapid, unconventional play-calling, provides that. The system does not require big-time weapons—hence the release of headache DeSean Jackson. It just needs speedsters who can make plays in space. Many of Kelly's route combos paint a straightforward picture of progression reads for the passer. Still, not every QB can see that picture clearly and exploit what he sees. Even though Foles is not mobile enough to scare teams in the scheme's patented read-options (which Kelly has cut down on), he can be an excellent orchestrator by continuing to play with patience and discipline.

DE JASON PIERRE-PAUL

EAST

NEW YORK GIANTS

The few parts left from a Super Bowl–winning front four will determine whether this team can win another title

Defensive scheming, at its core, is just simple math. The objective is to disrupt the opposing quarterback with as few players as possible. In 2007 and '11 the Giants made successful Super Bowl runs as a good-but-not-great, low-seeded playoff team because they had a four-man pass rush that verged on being legendary.

Generating significant pressure with four linemen leaves a defense with seven players to cover five eligible receivers. To gain this same advantage, many D's have to operate out of amoeba 3–4 base schemes and use convoluted blitzes that confuse an offense's protections. It's a high-risk, high-reward approach—and one that those 4–3 Giants defenses were able to avoid, thanks to a bevy of dominant gap-shooting pass rushers. With the likes of Michael Strahan, Osi Umenyiora, Justin Tuck, Mathias Kiwanuka and, later, Jason Pierre-Paul working up front, the Giants could simply line up and attack the quarterback. Whatever gimmicks their defensive strategists did employ focused on the seven defenders left for coverage. That so-called NASCAR Front was so dominant, in fact, that those seven other defenders often had only four (and sometimes just three) potential receivers to worry about because of the extra bodies that offenses dedicated to help in pass protection.

But since the Giants' second Big Game ousting of New England, their front four has slowly and steadily declined. With Tuck's departure to Oakland in free agency (combined with Umenyiora's exit a year earlier and Strahan's retirement before that), Kiwanuka and Pierre-Paul are the only NASCAR Frontmen remaining, and neither was particularly impactful last season, when the Giants had one of

MIKE STONE/REUTERS

the most anemic pass rushes in the league. With straight pass rushers, the difference between good and great is razor thin, and it carries enormous repercussions. A 10% drop in performance can be the difference between reaching the QB or not—and, for the purpose of this discussion, between drawing a double team or not.

Even if the freakishly gifted Pierre-Paul bounces back from the back and shoulder injuries that slowed him in 2013, and even if Kiwanuka flourishes despite being saddled with more snaps—depending on how last year's third-round pick, Damontre Moore, and free-agent pickup Robert Ayers do in filling Tuck's old role—New York's pass rush could still be iffy in '14.

With that in mind, GM Jerry Reese invested heavily in cornerbacks this off-season, signing Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie to a five-year, $35 million deal and slot connoisseur Walter Thurmond to a one-year, $3.5 million contract. Their arrival gives coordinator Perry Fewell—one of the best teachers and schemers in the business—the freedom to play more man coverage, and therefore to do more with blitzes. (Bringing five or six pass rushers forces a quarterback to get rid of the ball early, and playing man coverage is the best way to disrupt receivers immediately after the snap.) The idea of a straight four-man rush could be evanescing in New York.

Rodgers-Cromartie and Thurmond will join a secondary that has suffered copious injuries of late. When healthy, it's a better unit than most people think. Cornerback Prince Amukamara is learning to play with confidence and starting to show the ability that made him a first-round pick in 2011. Safety Antrel Rolle is versatile enough to drop into the slot, where he's an excellent run defender and a potentially dynamic blitzer. (He's also a very capable read-and-react player in space.) With the talented Will Hill gone—he was suspended for six games for violating the league's substance-abuse policy and then cut—Rolle will be joined in the middle backfield by Stevie Brown, who'll be coming off a torn left ACL and hoping to regain the opportunism that he showed as a surprise starter in 2012, when he had eight interceptions and two fumble recoveries, an NFL-high combination.

The hope: A sharp secondary and an adequate pass rush can compensate for a mediocre linebacking unit. Fortunately the offense should be able to hold its own. Despite preseason struggles, a new system implemented by first-time coordinator Ben McAdoo will ultimately reinvigorate quarterback Eli Manning and what has become an increasingly inconsistent supporting cast. First-round rookie Odell Beckham Jr. (LSU) could give a jolt to the receiving corps if he overcomes a recurring hamstring issue, and tough-to-tackle free-agent running back Rashad Jennings is being counted on to headline a deep group of rushers.

The most important question on that side of the ball, though, is whether a young and revamped offensive line can improve. This franchise knows as well as any: Games are often decided by whether a front five wins or loses against a four-man rush. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 7–9

WEEK 1

DET (MON)
ARI
HOU
WAS (THUR)
ATL
PHI
DAL
BYE
IND (MON)
SEA
SF
DAL
JAX
TEN
WAS
STL
PHI

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

MAJOR CONCERN The offensive tackles

There were a few times last season in which New York's line was so inept, it was impossible for the offense to compete. Left tackle **Will Beatty** was particularly inconsistent in pass protection, and rookie right tackle **Justin Pugh** learned the hard way that he needs to develop more lower-body strength. Pugh has added some girth (we'll see if that holds up during the season), and he showed improvements in his technique and awareness late last year. Beatty, on the other hand, remains a concern, having missed chunks of New York's off-season program while he recovered from a broken right leg. The Giants have bet heavily on Beatty's return; the only true backup tackle on the roster is free agent **Charles Brown**, who never lived up to his second-round draft status with the Saints. It will take major strides from Pugh and consistency from Beatty for this line to provide what the Giants need.

THE CASE FOR Quarterback Eli Manning

The 33-year-old has played in the same system since joining the NFL in 2004. But that changed with the retirement last January of Kevin Gilbride—who coached the Giants' QBs or coordinated the O for the past 10 years—and the hiring of Packers QBs coach Ben McAdoo to take his place as the new OC. **McAdoo is installing a Green Bay–style offense, featuring a West Coast spread passing game**. In the past Manning has had to depend on exquisite timing with receivers at the intermediate levels; now he'll have to do that in the shallow, underneath areas. Staples of McAdoo's system include slants and crossing patterns synchronized with the QB's three-step drop—but quick timing alone won't define this O. With receivers like the shifty Victor Cruz, the athletic Rueben Randle and the speedy Odell Beckham Jr., selective deep shots still must be a major part of the plan. Given Manning's awareness, pocket poise and underappreciated arm strength (especially when he's off-balance or facing pressure), the Giants have the most important piece of any system: a gunslinging QB who knows how to manage games.

WR DESEAN JACKSON

ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES/LANDOV

EAST

WASHINGTON REDSKINS

New coach Jay Gruden wants RG3 to be a pocket passer. That should keep him healthier. But will he be better?

In his first year as an NFL head coach, Jay Gruden faces the same critical question that has haunted anyone who ever oversaw Michael Vick and watched him get pummeled: *How much do I let my quarterback run?*

As was the case with Vick, running is not something you can completely take away from Robert Griffin III; it's the most dangerous facet of his game. But just as with Vick, the more Griffin runs, the more punishing hits he absorbs. Griffin is listed at 6' 2" and 222 pounds, but he plays much frailer than that because he has little sense of how to protect himself, especially in the way he hits the ground.

Most of the big shots that Griffin has endured have actually come in the passing game. Still, Gruden has already indicated that his offense will employ less read-option this year than it did under Mike Shanahan. Not only will that reduce the number of times Griffin is smacked on runs, but it will propagate a more sophisticated passing attack, reducing the blows he takes on dropbacks too.

The downside of the read-option has always been that while it can put edge run defenders in a bind, it also creates simplistic pass designs that rely almost entirely on deception. Under Shanahan, if the pistol play-action didn't work, then Washington's entire offense didn't work.

Gruden must teach Griffin not to scramble so often. When a quarterback runs frequently, it becomes difficult for his 10 teammates to develop any sort of continuity. Week-to-week rhythm disappears. (This partly explains why so many of Vick's coaches tried to turn him into more of a pocket passer.)

Griffin will find this challenging. With a bulky right knee

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 3–13

WEEK 1

HOU

JAX

PHI

NYG THUR

SEA MON

ARI

TEN

DAL MON

MIN

BYE

TB

SF

IND

STL

NYG

PHI SAT

DAL

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

brace forcing the quarterback to stay in the pocket last season, a harsh truth was unmasked: At this point Griffin is a one-read passer, meaning that if his first option isn't open, his inclination is to scramble. There has never been a consistently great NFL quarterback who wasn't capable of dropping back and making at least three reads.

A major reason Griffin remains undeveloped as a progression passer is that his pocket mechanics are underdeveloped. His footwork is uneven, as are his senses of spacing and timing when the pocket naturally compresses (which is almost every down in the NFL).

Washington GM Bruce Allen presumably tapped Gruden in part because he believes the 47-year-old can develop RG3. Previously, as the Bengals' offensive coordinator, Gruden did impressive work with a young Andy Dalton. Being a former collegiate and Arena league quarterback himself, and given his familial background (older brother Jon won Super Bowl XXXVII with the Bucs), he has a rich understanding of how to teach the position.

It will be much easier for Griffin to learn these things now that he has veritable weapons around him. Newly acquired wideout DeSean Jackson is not quite a true No. 1 (he struggles too much against press coverage), but he is a true home run hitter. Gruden will design plays with presnap motion and receivers aligning close to one another, crisscrossing off the line of scrimmage in order to help Jackson get a clean release. One overlooked benefit of having a burner like Jackson: He usually commands safety help over the top, which makes coverages easier to identify. That's a great way to accelerate Griffin's pocket passing development.

Opposite Jackson, Pierre Garçon is perfectly equipped to capitalize on what should turn out to be more single coverage underneath, where he'll continue to execute crossing patterns that highlight his run-after-the-catch ability. Garçon can also be a presence at the deep-intermediate levels, something that was missing from Washington's passing game a year ago.

The rest of the receiving group is deep: Free-agent pickup Andre Roberts (Cardinals) can boost the slot and fourth-round rookie Ryan Grant (Tulane) can push long-strider Aldrick Robinson and savvy veteran Santana Moss for playing time.

More exciting than perhaps all of those options is Jordan Reed, a third-round pick in 2013 who has a chance to become a top five tight end. A quick, fluid athlete, the 6' 2", 236-pound Reed can consistently beat any safety (and especially any linebacker) in man coverage. To draw these matchups, Gruden will move him all over his formations, perhaps even into the backfield.

Couple this retooled passing attack with a sturdy Alfred Morris–led ground game and an offensive line that's younger and deeper at every spot around Pro Bowl left tackle Trent Williams, and you're looking at an offense that's capable of recapturing the NFC East—provided its quarterback can grasp that attack in a hurry. □

SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

THE BIG FIX Getting flexible

By using their first draft pick on pass-rushing outside backer **Trent Murphy** (Stanford), Washington brass suggested that they plan either to soon move on from franchise-tagged **Brian Orakpo** or to create a unique long-term pass-rushing *trio* that would include athletic technician **Ryan Kerrigan**. Regardless, they have options, and that seems to be what's most important to coordinator Jim Haslett. Further evidence of an emphasis on flexibility: the guaranteed $10.5 million the team paid free agent **Jason Hatcher**, 32, to bolster its D-line. Hatcher just had a career year in Dallas after being used as a gap penetrator for the first time; his arrival will trigger more attack-oriented concepts for Haslett's 3–4 based line. Alongside Hatcher, **Barry Cofield** moves very well for a nosetackle, and he shot gaps at times with the Giants. Such adaptability along the line and among the 'backers will enable Haslett to use his full repertoire of front-seven schemes.

THE CASE FOR Defensive coordinator Jim Haslett

Statistically, Haslett's D has been unimpressive the past two seasons: 31st in yards per pass attempt in 2013; 28th in total yards the year before. But new coach Jay Gruden kept him because **Haslett runs an unpredictable scheme that offenses hate preparing for**. In part to compensate for subpar secondary personnel, Haslett has used some aggressive ploys. On one play his D will crowd the line, only to drop into an eight-man hybrid zone; on the next it might show soft coverage, only to bring an all-out blitz. Such tactics usually bring about risky, unfavorable defensive matchups—a linebacker on an inside receiver—but Haslett's thinking is: If you already have a bad matchup, why not live with a slightly worse one in exchange for a chance to wreak havoc elsewhere? Haslett's is a playmaker-friendly approach, which explains why he's comfortable deploying gamblers like cornerback DeAngelo Hall and strong safety Brandon Meriweather. With questions at free safety and inside 'backer in 2014, he will need these playmakers to rise up.

RB **DEMARCO MURRAY**

EAST

DALLAS COWBOYS

They run the Offense of the Future—and given their weaknesses on defense, the future better come soon

We've seen the future of the NFL offense, and it looks a lot like the 2013 Cowboys'. More times than any team except the Cardinals last year, Dallas lined up in a 3 × 2 empty set, with three pass catchers to one side, two to the other and nobody but the quarterback in the backfield. Most offenses use this formation to add dimension to the standard three-wideout personnel, with the running back flexing out. The idea: Catch a defense off guard or create a one-on-one mismatch (or both). But the Cowboys' empty sets, often featuring one tight end and *four* wide receivers, made clear their aerial intentions.

The advantages of a 3 × 2 empty are straightforward. When an offense spreads out, so does the defense, making coverages tough to disguise and creating bigger gaps in the zones. Most defenses respond by using pure man-to-man, which enables the offense to run more pick routes and creates more favorable mismatches. It also more clearly defines the coverage for the quarterback, who can make key decisions presnap as opposed to when the heat is on.

All of this plays to the strengths of Tony Romo; it's likely no coincidence that Dallas's increase in spread sets came in the same year, 2013, that he assumed a greater role in his team's game planning. Romo is fairly acute before the snap. But after it he's a so-so decision maker with a tendency to get fooled by trap coverages, which defenses tend to unleash against him in crucial fourth-quarter moments.

To help Romo, the Cowboys essentially demoted offensive coordinator Bill Callahan, who'll

KYLE RIVAS/GETTY IMAGES

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8–8

WEEK 1

SF

TEN

STL

NO

HOU

SEA

NYG

WAS MON

ARI

LONDON JAX

BYE

NYG

PHI THUR

CHI THUR

PHI

IND

WAS

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

now focus on the running game and the O-line, and brought in passing-game coordinator Scott Linehan to call plays. Recall that before last season, coach Jason Garrett was the play-caller. Jerry Jones changed that.

To be clear, Linehan wasn't hired to redefine this offense; his aim is to bring more continuity to the play-calling and sharpen some of the route designs. Before Dallas he spent five years in Detroit crafting plays around a superstar receiver, Calvin Johnson, who almost always influenced opponents' coverages. With the Cowboys, Linehan has a similar weapon in double-team magnet Dez Bryant.

What Linehan *didn't* have with the Lions is a tight end who commands double teams. At 32, Jason Witten remains as potent as ever, thanks largely to a playing style that's not dependent on speed. Instead, he excels at making contested catches, especially at the shallow intermediate levels, providing Romo with a security blanket and giving Linehan another weapon to build around.

Linehan has never been zealous about the ground game, but he will need to find more balance between the pass and run calls. The Cowboys have an outstanding ballcarrier in DeMarco Murray—if he stays healthy. Murray missed three games as a rookie in 2011 (right ankle), six games in '12 (left foot) and two games last season (left MCL). He's a strong downhill runner who, though stiff in the hips, can muster just enough wiggle to create spaces and break tackles. Murray's 5.2 yards per carry last year ranked third among running backs with at least 100 attempts.

If Murray is out, reserve backs Lance Dunbar and Joseph Randle can still be productive, thanks to what could evolve into the league's most dominant offensive line. This unit is built not for power (like Dallas's Great Wall of the early 1990s) but for movement. Insanely athletic left tackle Tyron Smith, for one, is ascending at a rate that could make him the NFL's best lineman by season's end. Center Travis Frederick (whom many pundits thought the Cowboys drafted too early, late in the first round last year, but who was named to the NFL's All-Rookie Team) has terrific initial quickness, allowing him to execute "reach and seal" blocks against defenders inside—vital on zone-running plays. Joining Frederick inside are the slow-twitched Ronald Leary and this year's first-round pick, Zack Martin (Notre Dame), who the team expects will immediately correct a glaring weakness at right guard. And at right tackle Doug Free seems to have recaptured his big-money form after two down years forced him into a pay cut before 2013.

The pieces are in place for an extraordinary offense. And considering that the Cowboys' defense is painfully undermanned, that's what they'll need if they're to finish better than .500 for the first time since 2010. □

ROBERT HANASHIRO/USA TODAY SPORTS

MAJOR CONCERN The defensive front

After a brutal rash of injuries last year, the Cowboys' D suffered even deeper losses during the off-season when future Hall of Famer **DeMarcus Ware** signed with the Broncos and Pro Bowl tackle **Jason Hatcher** joined Washington. The football gods delivered another blow when star middle linebacker Sean Lee tore his ACL in May OTAs. There's no viable option to replace Lee. To fill the voids on the line, Dallas traded up to draft pass rusher **Demarcus Lawrence** (Boise State) with the 34th pick and signed former Pro Bowl defensive tackle **Henry Melton**. Both have injury concerns. Lawrence missed virtually all of training camp with a broken foot and will begin the season on the shelf. Melton battled a groin injury in camp after missing 13 games in 2013 with a left ACL tear. (If his knee looked promising this off-season, wouldn't Chicago have re-signed him?) Downgrading at defensive end and tackle wouldn't be so bad except that the rest of Dallas's front seven is composed of makeshift players.

THE CASE FOR Cornerback Brandon Carr

The former Chief received roughly $14 million last year as part of a five-year, $50 million contract. Aside from a little trouble playing with outside leverage against top receivers, Carr fully justified the signing—but he'll have to perform even better in 2014. New defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli is going to ramp up the man coverage. Last season the Cowboys used Monte Kiffin's zone-based Cover Three scheme—a modernized version of the dying Cover Two—and **by Week 15 they'd yielded the most yards in franchise history**. Kiffin went with more zones because he wanted defenders to have their eyes on the ball and to create more turnovers. That worked. After causing just 16 turnovers in Rob Ryan's man-based scheme in '12, Dallas forced 28 in '13. With this in mind, Marinelli will probably use firm man coverage only on the outside. Inside, he'll stick with zone, mimicking the scheme that has worked for the Seahawks. While the Cowboys' resources are nowhere near Seattle's, they do have at least one qualified press corner in Carr, who plays bigger than his actual size and knows how to be physical.

WR **JORDY NELSON**

1

GREEN BAY PACKERS

They went to the ground game out of necessity last year. Now it will make them even more dangerous in the air

NORTH

A question that every NFL coach is grappling with these days: *Just how important is the ground game?*

It's not just that the NFL rule book has become more favorable to passers; it's also that the proliferation of unconventional defensive fronts has made it harder on runners. While generally viewed as a pass-rushing tactic, a hybrid or amoeba defense makes blockers' assignments hard to identify—and indecision is a deadly sin in run-blocking, where the point is to create angles and lanes through collective timing and force. Instead of trying to figure out complicated run-blocking assignments, many offensive coordinators find it easier to use quick-strike throws or deep play-action shots on early downs.

Coach Mike McCarthy knows all about this. His West Coast spread system is on the cutting edge of three-step passing. But last season, when quarterback Aaron Rodgers (a master of this offense) was sidelined for seven weeks with a broken left collarbone, McCarthy had to lean more on his rushers.

In doing so, he discovered that he has a bell-cow back in 5' 11", 230-pound Eddie Lacy. The 61st pick in last year's draft out of Alabama averaged a stalwart 18.5 carries and 80.8 yards during Rodgers's absence. Capitalizing on Lacy's patience, the Packers wisely installed a bundle of shotgun tosses, getting the ball into Lacy's hands earlier and deeper behind the line, allowing him to set up blocks rather than rely on initial quickness, which he doesn't have.

When Rodgers returned, McCarthy maintained the balance between the run and the pass. That may have been an effort to help his QB, who was never entirely comfortable post-injury; it was certainly an effort to help Green Bay's

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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mediocre offensive line. Defenders who must be mindful of the run can't simply pin their ears back and attack blockers.

That kind of help will be needed again. Though left tackle David Bakhtiari improved late in his rookie year, he still can't be fully trusted to spar with elite edge rushers. Neither can Bryan Bulaga, who'll return from a torn left ACL and start at right tackle.

By staying balanced, not only will the Packers have a rushing attack that opponents must respect, but they can also implement more of their passing concepts out of running formations. This naturally means an increase in play-action and chip blocks, two tactics that aid an overmatched O-line.

Still, McCarthy, with a healthy superstar at quarterback, will be strongly tempted to spread out and revert to the air. Rodgers is a sharp presnap decision maker, capable of getting rid of the ball quickly. He also has an unmatched ability to make plays after his protection breaks down and a sweet arsenal of playmakers at his disposal. Jordy Nelson, a back-shoulder-catching maestro, emerged as a slot weapon last season while Randall Cobb missed 10 games with a broken right fibula. Cobb, who previously filled the slot role, is at full strength, providing tremendous formation flexibility. Defenses could see Nelson aligned in the slot and Cobb in the backfield in 2014. Such an array would all but guarantee that a linebacker has to pick up one of those playmakers. Advantage, Pack.

Rounding out the receiving corps, 24-year-old Jarret Boykin sharpened his awareness and route running when forced into the lineup last season, though not enough to dissuade GM Ted Thompson from drafting Davante Adams (Fresno State) in the second round. One of those two will fill the No. 3 role vacated by James Jones, who signed with the Raiders in free agency.

In the third round Thompson tabbed tight end Richard Rodgers (California), who, if in shape, will have a chance to complement Andrew Quarless, a fifth-year pro who performed well during Jermichael Finley's prolonged absences. Quarless is not a great in-line run blocker, which means McCarthy may have to employ a heavier formation that includes fullback John Kuhn when he wants to establish the run.

The problem, of course, is that Rodgers could convert 12 sensational third-and-longs, but if he gets hurt on the 13th, none of that matters. And it would be difficult for Green Bay to survive his prolonged absence again. Keep in mind: Though they finished atop the NFC North last year, the Packers were 2-5-1 in games Rodgers didn't finish.

All of which gives McCarthy a lot to think about—but the good thing is, almost all his options are appealing. If something doesn't work in the running game, he can trust his quarterback and receivers to bail him out. That's the luxury of having talent. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-7-1

WEEK 1

SEA THUR
NYJ
DET
CHI
MIN THUR
MIA
CAR
NO
BYE
CHI
PHI
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NE
ATL MON
BUF
TB
DET

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

KEY CONCEPT Improvisation

When, inevitably, the offensive structure breaks down, playmakers take over. **Aaron Rodgers** is as good as any QB in the league—maybe ever—at ad-libbing. He keeps his eyes downfield, uses his mobility to elude rushers and, most important, employs that sterling right arm to make throws from awkward angles and through tight windows. **Jordy Nelson** is Green Bay's top receiver, but **Randall Cobb** is Rodgers's go-to guy when a play's structure disappears. A shifty athlete, Cobb has an innate ability to work himself open late in the down. And, like his quarterback, he knows how to improvise. A perfect example: Cobb's game-winning 48-yard touchdown catch at Chicago in Week 17. On that crucial fourth-and-eight play, he appeared primed to run a short route but cut upfield when he noticed the Bears' blown coverage, trusting that his quarterback would see the same thing. Between Rodgers and Cobb, that knack for improvising will carry the Pack in a pinch.

THE CASE FOR Cornerback Sam Shields

While Green Bay fans are psyched about the arrival of defensive end Julius Peppers, the re-signing of Shields means much more. GM Ted Thompson paid heavily to keep him—$39 million over four years—because the undrafted fifth-year pro has become a pillar of the Packers' D. Coordinator Dom Capers is a founding father of the zone blitz, but in recent years he has concocted new pressure concepts, some involving six rushers instead of a blitz's usual five. To execute these he needs his corners to play tight man, and Shields has **developed into one of the league's premier boundary corners**. Last season he pressed against A.J. Green, Calvin Johnson, Brandon Marshall, DeSean Jackson and Dez Bryant. He doesn't always win these matchups, but his competitiveness in these pairings allows Capers to be more aggressive in deploying his other defenders. Expect more man coverage from Green Bay in 2014. Number 2 corner Tramon Williams is capable inside or outside. Casey Hayward, a ball hawk as a rookie in '12, is healthy after last year's hamstring problems and will fill the slot. Davon House would be a No. 2 press corner for most teams. And all of them get more favorable matchups because Shields can take on No. 1 receivers.

RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES

"I became a maternal health advocate the day I became a mom."
Christy Turlington Burns
Maternal Health Advocate and Founder of Every Mother Counts
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QB **JAY CUTLER**

2

CHICAGO BEARS

Gunslinging QB. Quality protection. Downfield targets. All-purpose back. This offense has everything covered

NORTH

Most of the time when a pundit talks about "good coaching," he's just dealing in empty Skip Bayless–style rhetoric—a judgment made after the fact. Maybe there will be some allusion to the coach's motivational skill, but who outside the locker room can accurately assess that? Besides, pep talks don't matter to players; what does is operating in a system that maximizes their talent.

Thanks to a deep understanding of his personnel, second-year coach Marc Trestman has built a system that's as effective as it is comprehensive. For years the Bears' roster has been vastly superior on defense. But that changed in 2013, after the defense suffered a slew of injuries and a talented offense finally developed its identity.

That identity begins, boringly enough, with the blocking up front. Even before signing tackle Jermon Bushrod (Saints) and guard Matt Slauson (Jets) in free agency in 2013, Trestman hired former New Orleans offensive line coach Aaron Kromer as his coordinator and tasked him with helping install pass protections. Now, instead of waiting and reacting to a defender's attack, every Chicago lineman is taught to be the aggressor. That's the opposite of how typical pass protection works, but it explains why Bushrod and Slauson each enjoyed career years, and why, on the right side, first-round guard Kyle Long and fifth-round tackle Jordan Mills survived as rookie starters.

These aggressive protections create a bigger pocket for quarterback Jay Cutler, an insanely gifted gunslinger who, under Trestman, has been diligently trying to sharpen his footwork, mechanics and progression tim-

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2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 8-8

WEEK 1

BUF

SF

NYJ MON

GB

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ATL

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DET THUR

DAL THUR

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DET

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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

ing. Many of these core elements are still new to the 31-year-old, and he has a ways to go in terms of consistency. But, as his new seven-year, $126.7 million contract ($54 million of it guaranteed) shows, the Bears believe he can get there.

Under Trestman, Cutler's infamously sour attitude has sweetened—perhaps because he's getting pummeled much less frequently. After being sacked 2.6 times per game in his first four years in Chicago, Cutler last season averaged just 1.7. And his unofficial QB hits were way down. Some of that can be credited to his improved timing and mechanics, but more of it has to do with Trestman's use of six- and seven-man protections. According to Football Outsiders, the Bears used six offensive linemen (typically adding guard Eben Britton) on a league-high 15.9% of their snaps in 2013. No other team was above 10%.

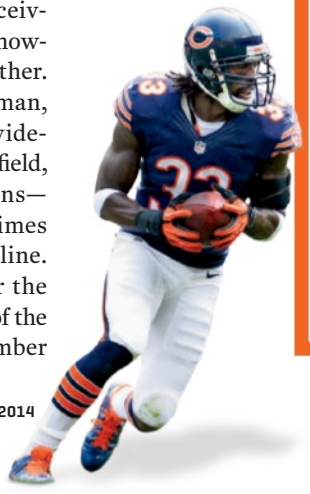
They can afford to sacrifice pass-catching personnel for extra blockers because, with the monstrous duo of Brandon Marshall (6' 4", 230 pounds) and Alshon Jeffery (6' 3", 216), they have wide receivers who consistently defeat double coverage downfield. Marshall, a strong route runner (especially against zone looks), has been the primary concern of most opposing defenses. But after the long-striding, huge-handed Jeffery showed off his playmaking prowess in his second season, that will change. All the better for Marshall.

Boasting a dominant receiving tandem is one thing; knowing how best to use it is another. Here, more points for Trestman, who likes to deploy both wideouts on the same side of the field, usually in "tight" formations—inside the numbers, sometimes nuzzled near the offensive line. This creates more field for the route runners and, because of the unbalance, shrinks the number of coverage disguises that Cutler will encounter.

After the snap Trestman uses an array of lethal route combinations in which his receivers intersect off the line of scrimmage—a switch release, in football parlance—and he enhances the attack by incorporating tight end Martellus Bennett, a 6' 6" jumpball specialist, as well as versatile running back Matt Forte.

Forte speaks to another example of good coaching. Over his first five years in the NFL he wasn't taught the ins and outs of pass protection. Trestman and Kromer taught him. Using his new understanding of blocking mechanics, Forte has turned one of the offense's glaring weaknesses into a strength. With his smooth hips and sharp vision, he is finally a complete back.

These are the nuts and bolts of well-designed, well-coached football—vastly more important than any locker room speech. Barring more injuries on defense, they're also what make the Bears a contender for the NFC North crown, if not a conference title. □



MIKE DINOVO/USA TODAY SPORTS

THE BIG FIX The defensive front

The Bears allowed an NFL-worst 161.4 yards per game on the ground last season—and a shameful 197.1 after Week 6. Any improvement against the run begins with linebackers **Lance Briggs** and **D.J. Williams**, who combined to start just 13 games last year. Their return to health allows second-year 'backers Jon Bostic and Khaseem Greene to learn off the bench. The line has been upgraded, with a new defensive end trio of **Lamarr Houston** (from the Raiders), **Jared Allen** (Vikings) and **Willie Young** (Lions). Houston is a solid run-stopper; Allen lost a step last year but can be a force under a more controlled snap count; and Young has the speed to get 10 sacks. Inside, behind the talented but injury-prone **Jeremiah Ratliff** and **Stephen Paea**, Chicago has second-round rookie Ego Ferguson (LSU) and third-rounder Will Sutton (Arizona State). Both draftees are viewed as gap penetrators, not blocker-eaters, which suggests the Bears have every intention of sticking with their basic but well-taught 4-3 zone scheme. If Chicago's D can merely avoid injuries, better run-stopping is almost guaranteed.

THE CASE FOR Cornerback Charles Tillman

Corners aren't supposed to maintain their Pro Bowl form into their mid-30s. But while some minor injuries in recent years have made Tillman, 33, appear old at times, there's nothing on film to suggest that he's not still a top-shelf player. He has intercepted three passes each of the past three seasons, **returned five of them for touchdowns and forced a staggering 17 fumbles**. (No other player has more than 14 in that span.) As one of the best off-man corners in football—that is, a zone or a man-to-man defender who does not press receivers off the line—Tillman has a masterly grasp of angles and route combinations. He also has a near-perfect understanding of how to use his help, be it a safety over the top, a linebacker underneath or (often overlooked) the sideline. As great as the veteran leader is, the Bears know his days are numbered: They re-signed him for just one season and drafted zone-based corner Kyle Fuller (Virginia Tech) in the first round. But with a revamped pass rush designed to force quarterbacks into quick throws, Tillman could have the type of year that will force Chicago to re-up him again.

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DE ZIGGY ANSAH

3

DETROIT LIONS

A new coordinator and a front four loaded with first-round talent must elevate a disappointing defense

NORTH

The system a defensive coordinator chooses to run tells you something about his coaching style: Is he more of a teacher, or is he a schemer at heart?

If he's a teacher, he prefers to dedicate practice hours to drilling fundamentals and mechanics. This results in a simplified scheme, based on execution, and it requires less classroom work. A schemer, on the other hand, is more inclined to spend extra time adding wrinkles to his various packages. Instead of outexecuting opponents, he tries to outsmart them.

Execution-based defense is harder to play against, while complex schemes are more difficult to prepare for. The rule of thumb is, The better your personnel, the simpler your scheme can be.

Martin Mayhew, in his sixth season as Lions general manager, clearly prefers the better-personnel, basic-scheme route, having spent high first-round picks on defensive linemen Ndamukong Suh (2010), Nick Fairley ('11) and Ziggy Ansah ('13). Mayhew understands that a formidable, basic 4–3 zone starts with thunderous line play, and that's what his handpicked coach, the defensive-minded Jim Schwartz, emphasized. But the results were not good. In Schwartz's five seasons, Detroit ranked 32nd, 19th, 23rd, 27th and 15th in points allowed (though it's worth noting that in the two years before Schwartz's arrival, the Lions ranked last both times).

Now Mayhew has new coaches, and the schemes will become more complex. Head man Jim Caldwell, who came over from Baltimore, where he was offensive coordinator, brought with him Ravens secondary coach Teryl

GEOFF BURKE/USA TODAY SPORTS

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 7–9

WEEK 1

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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

Austin, who replaces Gunther Cunningham (now a senior coaching assistant) as defensive coordinator. Austin's former defense was not quite as multiple as people assume; it hasn't been since 2009, when then coordinator Rex Ryan left Baltimore to coach the Jets. But if the Lions weren't looking for a coordinator who would change tactics, they would have tapped a Cover Two retread such as Dick Jauron or kept the respected Cunningham.

To be fair, Cunningham has been a diverse schemer over his long career, and he started expanding his arsenal in Detroit last season, mainly by moving his linemen around, especially early in games. Austin will likely advance those concepts, with Suh being the linchpin. Though the defensive tackle's numbers have never matched the 10 sacks and 49 tackles he had as a rookie, Suh remains one of the most disruptive linemen in football. He attacks blocks and willingly draws double teams, creating opportunities for his teammates.

The main beneficiary of this is fellow tackle Fairley, whose fifth-year option the team tellingly did not pick up as a means of motivating him. (Message received? The gifted but inconsistent dynamo dropped more than 25 pounds, and actually had to put weight back on after being told by his coaches that he was too light.) Ansah, who was born in Ghana and didn't start playing organized football until he was a sophomore at BYU, was as raw as *war* spelled backward his rookie season. But he has the speed and power to pile up double-digit sacks even though he is still in the nascent stages of his development. His eight sacks led all rookies.

But unless the Lions' talented line lives up to its potential—which it hasn't since 2010—Austin will have to lean on the back seven to carry out his ploys. He has a pair of decent (but only decent) coverage linebackers in DeAndre Levy and Stephen Tulloch, and joining them in the base 4–3 will be versatile second-round rookie Kyle Van Noy from BYU. Where most schemes create deception is at safety, and Detroit has interchangeable ones in free-agent pickup James Ihedigbo, who played for Austin in Baltimore, and six-year veteran Glover Quin, one of the better man-to-man tight end defenders in the league. But there's no quality depth behind them, and the cornerback unit is far from reliable.

At least Austin has the good fortune of coaching opposite an offense that features maybe the best pure arm in football (quarterback Matthew Stafford), the most physically imposing wide receiver ever (Calvin Johnson) and versatile ancillary weapons in running back Reggie Bush and first-round rookie tight end Eric Ebron. Detroit's ability to score in bunches gives Austin more leeway to take chances—a schemer's favorite way to compensate for shortcomings in personnel. □

CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

FOCUS ON The QB's new scheme

For the first time since his rookie year, in 2009, **Matthew Stafford** is learning a new system—that of **Joe Lombardi**, the former Saints quarterbacks coach who was hired by the Lions to install New Orleans's advanced, verbiage-heavy scheme. Stafford, whose arm can be described—both positively and negatively—as a loose cannon, is now being asked to handle a heavier mental load. It will be fascinating to see how much presnap motion is in Lombardi's offense. Stafford has always preferred to line up in a static formation in order to get a still picture of the defense and identify some of the crazy coverages dedicated to **Calvin Johnson**. Last season, though, Stafford did have more reps with Megatron aligning in the slot and a wide receiver shifting or a running back going in motion. The expectation is that Lombardi will view Johnson as he did Saints All-Pro tight end Jimmy Graham: The more ways he's used, the bigger headaches he causes. The key to this new complexity, though, is how quickly Stafford grasps it.

THE CASE FOR Reggie Bush & Joique Bell

Bush has been a football celebrity for over 10 years, the electrifying tailback from USC who never quite lived up to expectations. But he is also admired by aficionados for the way he has developed into a respectable between-the-tackles runner late in his career. Bell *(left)* is a 5' 11", 229-pound back who is built like a plodder, except that he doesn't actually plod. Last season defenses never got wise to the skills of the 28-year-old undrafted journeyman as he torched them with his vision, patience and surprisingly light feet. While Bush was dangerous on swing passes and option routes, Bell was lethal on screens—sometimes running them off Bush's routes in a dual backfield. **Bush and Bell became the first running back tandem to each have more than 500 yards rushing and 500 yards receiving.** The duo could inflict even more damage this year. Detroit has an athletic tight end in rookie Eric Ebron (North Carolina) to go with a new No. 2 receiver in Seahawks free agent Golden Tate. Defenses will have more to worry about downfield, creating even greater opportunities underneath for the backfield playmakers.

DE **EVERSON GRIFFEN**

NORTH

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

New coach Mike Zimmer has the players he needs up front to sugar the A gaps and reinvigorate the D

Adrian Peterson is the best downhill runner in football, by far. The gap between Peterson and the next guy is the biggest chasm between any two players at the top of their category.

But you could argue that Peterson's greatness has been pointless in recent years, since the Vikings have mostly floundered on the other side of the ball. A run-first offense demands superior defense for a couple of reasons: 1) games tend to be closer and lower scoring because rushing eats up more clock, and 2) teams with weak defenses often fall behind, forcing them to abandon the run. This explains why general managers prefer to build around a quarterback instead of a running back: No game situation can effectively remove a great passer from the offensive equation.

Last year Minnesota's defense seemed to specialize in surrendering big plays. It ranked 30th in opponents' success rate on third down (44.2%) and, despite using a simplistic Cover Two–based scheme designed to force turnovers, was next to last in the NFC in that statistic, with 20.

Enter Mike Zimmer, a 58-year-old first-time head coach and former Bengals defensive coordinator who has made his living forcing opponents into mistakes with confusing presnap looks and aggressive play-calling. One of Zimmer's staples is placing a linebacker on each side of the center before the snap, a tactic known as "sugaring the A gaps." This forces the offensive line to adjust its protections to the inside, leaving one-on-one matchups for pass rushers outside. From there Zimmer loves to drop a lineman into coverage,

MATTHEW EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS

creating a zone blitz or zone exchange in which an unconventional pass rusher replaces a conventional one after the snap. He'll also blitz a safety off the edge and disguise his coverages.

The nice thing about Zimmer's defense is its only severe need is for defensive linemen who can drop into shallow coverage or consistently win one-on-one pass-rushing battles—and the Vikings have them. Despite having only 17½ sacks in four seasons, end Everson Griffen received a five-year, $42.5 million contract with $19.8 million guaranteed because of his versatility and the explosiveness he has flashed. In Zimmer's scheme he will thrive.

Rookie linebacker Anthony Barr, the No. 9 pick out of UCLA, will have a chance to shine as well. A 6' 5", 255-pound outstanding athlete who is still developing, Barr could earn a role in the nickel package, and he'll get serious consideration as a base 4–3 strongside linebacker, a position at which the Vikings need help.

Leading the 'backers is Chad Greenway, who can blitz or drop into coverage and should excel as an A-gap mugger. One of the men Greenway will be creating single-blocking scenarios for is defensive tackle Sharrif Floyd. The 2013 first-round pick has the short-area movement skills of a player with significant potential, though he also has the subpar ground-holding abilities of a man not guaranteed to fulfill it.

Joining Floyd inside is free-agent pickup Linval Joseph, who, based on his history with the Giants, will make just enough plays to stay in the starting lineup. There's also eight-year veteran Fred Evans, who has the initial burst to be an every-down force but suffers from inconsistency. Former Bears end Corey Wootton, who will push but not beat out eight-year veteran Brian Robison for first-string snaps, also has experience inside. Wootton would only play in pass situations, though, given his susceptibility against the run.

In the secondary third-year safety Harrison Smith offers great awareness. It will be interesting to see whether Zimmer puts the potential Pro Bowler in centerfield or in the box, where he could rush off the edge. There may not be room for Smith up front, however, as Minnesota signed former Panthers cornerback Captain Munnerlyn not just for his coverage acumen but also for his blitzing ability from the slot. Munnerlyn's taking the slot corner role will allow speedy third-year man Josh Robinson to play outside, opposite '13 first-round pick Xavier Rhodes, who can be suffocating with jams off the line of scrimmage, but only if he's near the boundary.

You wouldn't call the Vikings' individual pieces great, but under Zimmer's orchestration, they're good enough to make a superstar running back much more relevant. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 5-10-1

WEEK 1

STL
NE
NO
ATL
GB (THUR)
DET
BUF
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BYE
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NYJ
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CHI

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

MAJOR CONCERN The quarterbacks

Let's be honest: The Vikings drafted **Teddy Bridgewater** out of Louisville with the last pick of the first round because they felt compelled to take a quarterback. And that was only because in 2011 they also felt they had to take a first-round quarterback, and that selection, **Christian Ponder**, hasn't worked out. If winning right away is important, Bridgewater will spend his rookie season taking notes while watching **Matt Cassel** lead the offense. Cassel is by no means a star, as demonstrated by his years with the Chiefs, but he has the skill set to execute the system of new coordinator **Norv Turner**, which is big on throwing passes in the 15-to-20-yard range. The rub: Without a big arm, Cassel needs sound protection so he will have space to step into throws. While Cassel is tough enough to deliver the ball when he's about to get hit, he's not effective when doing so. The Vikings' offensive line—LT Matt Kalil, LG Charlie Johnson, C John Sullivan, RG Brandon Fusco and RT Phil Loadholt—is decent in the run game, but it tends to struggle in pass protection. For Cassel to do well, he needs Kalil, the fourth pick of the '12 draft, to play consistently to his capabilities.

THE CASE FOR Receiver Cordarrelle Patterson

Last year Patterson looked every bit the unripe rookie who played only one season of major college football, at Tennessee. But the former junior college track star also showed the playmaking talent that inspired GM Rick Spielman to trade back into the first round to get him with what ended up being the third of Minnesota's three first-round picks in 2013. Besides averaging a league-best 32.4 yards on kick returns (and running back two for touchdowns), Patterson late in the season developed into a viable contributor on offense, doing more than just catching the quick screens that then coordinator Bill Musgrave had designed for him. New coordinator Norv Turner's system expands almost all pass patterns by roughly 20% of their standard length. If Patterson can build on his encouraging, though still primitive, route running, **he'll be a big-play weapon in Turner's field-stretching scheme**.

1

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Swashbuckling fans will adore new coach Lovie Smith's D—especially when it sails this team into the playoffs

NFC SOUTH

New coach Lovie Smith makes no bones about it: He's a Tampa Two adherent. Even though that's the same defensive scheme that his predecessor, Greg Schiano, was censured for running, Smith is making it his foundation. And Bucs fans should be excited about that.

The Tampa Two—concocted in its modern form 18 years ago by Tony Dungy and Monte Kiffin, with Smith serving as their linebackers coach—is the same as a traditional Cover Two zone scheme, but with one difference: The middle linebacker, instead of defending one of the shallow underneath zones, drops back into coverage—as deep as the most interior receiving target. (In Chicago, where Smith last coached, this was often Brian Urlacher; here it will be the less gifted but gradually improving Mason Foster.) The Tampa Two requires outstanding movement skills among the linebackers because it leaves a larger zone void underneath, and it demands that outside 'backers have the speed to refill that void on runs and shorter passes.

While Smith will adhere to his Tampa Two principles, he won't be held prisoner by them. As is true with any scheme, opponents have figured out how to exploit the Tampa Two. Offenses use more unbalanced spreads these days, and in those alignments the Tampa Two's natural and potent symmetry disappears. For that reason it's more accurate to call Smith's scheme today not a Tampa Two but a 4–3 zone, with the zones being adapted to modern offenses. But just as in an outright Tampa Two, the variety of straightforward zone concepts in Smith's 4–3 still require speed and fine-tuned fundamentals, especially up front.

As anyone who followed Smith

GARY BOGDON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 4–12

WEEK 1

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ATL THUR

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WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

in his nine seasons with the Bears knows, generating pressure on the quarterback with just four rushers is vital in a 4–3 zone. That used to mean that a defense needed four studs who could win battles alone by attacking straight ahead. But that has evolved too; Smith will now rely on more tandem pass-rushing concepts that are built on teamwork and deception. The Bucs, in fact, were superb with this type of attacking under Schiano, who used a variety of twists and stunts.

Executing these twists and stunts requires a versatile type of defender, and so Smith and new GM Jason Licht went out and spent a guaranteed $24 million on Bengals end Michael Johnson, who, aside from his 11½-sack campaign in 2012, has averaged just 3.75 sacks over his five-year career. Johnson is not a certifiable edge burner, but he is a sensationally supple athlete who can add dimension to Tampa's pass rush. He'll make a great pairing for defensive tackle Gerald McCoy, who has blossomed into a gap-shooting star after being taken with the No. 3 pick out of Oklahoma four years ago.

Don't be surprised if McCoy regularly positions himself on the same side as Johnson after lining up next to Adrian Clayborn last year. Clayborn is a solid puzzle piece in his own right, possessing bull-rushing aptitude and just enough redirect agility to thrive in stunts and line slants. Filling out the base 4–3 will be Akeem Spence, an athletic second-year nose-shade tackle. And in nickel it will be Clinton McDonald, who emerged as a superb gap shooter last year in Seattle.

One reason the Tampa Two has dwindled in popularity is that, being a tightly structured zone scheme, it does not incorporate many blitzes, which generally require man-to-man coverage. When Smith was saddled with a mediocre D-line in his final year with the Bears, he strayed from some of his usual zone tactics and infused his pass rush with a blitzer or two. With the skill along Tampa's four-man line, he won't have to do that—though, given his roster, he could be tempted. Budding superstar linebacker Lavonte David had seven sacks last season, and fellow outside 'backer Jonathan Casillas is in the NFL largely because of his blitzing ferocity.

If anything, it will be a pair of zone corners, tailor-made for Smith's scheme, that keep the coach true to his 4–3 zone. On one side Alterraun Verner, formerly of the Titans, is a rising read-and-jump defender of passing lanes. On the other, 2013 second-round pick Johnthan Banks is a somewhat stiff athlete but an uncommonly precocious field reader.

With playmakers at all three levels, this defense has a chance to be great, giving the Bucs a good chance to become the seventh team in the NFC South's 13-year history to leap from fourth place to first in one year. And to Smith's delight, they can do it using his old, beloved scheme. □

PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP

FOCUS ON The quarterbacks

It may seem odd that **Mike Glennon** was hardly even considered for Tampa's starting job. Despite signs that the 2013 third-rounder was developing into a classic pocket passer, the new regime signed the Bears' **Josh McCown** to a two-year, $10 million deal at the onset of free agency and promptly named him the starter. Perhaps this was the thinking: With a talented D, potent weapons at receiver and running back, and a rising left tackle in **Anthony Collins**, this team can bounce back from 4–12 and compete for a playoff spot right now, as long as there's dependability at quarterback. Why roll the dice with a 24-year-old who had a 4–9 record as a starter, who ranked 21st in passer rating last year and who may not grasp the offense right away? McCown, 35, has experience in a wealth of systems, and he proved in Chicago that he can consistently—and accurately—get the ball out of his hands within the timing and confines of a play design. That's enough for coach Lovie Smith and coordinator Jeff Tedford, and it's the Bucs' best bet at an instant turnaround.

THE CASE FOR Running back Doug Martin

The first-rounder from Boise State exploded on the scene in 2012 with 1,454 rushing yards, fifth among all backs. But last season Martin was shelved after a Week 7 tear of his left labrum, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The Bucs were winless at that point; any carries he accumulated from there on would only have put wasted mileage on his odometer. Conscious of that count, new coordinator Jeff Tedford talked this off-season about splitting Martin's load with third-round rookie Charles Sims (West Virginia) and last year's sixth-rounder, Mike James. Then both suffered crushing injuries in August, leaving Martin as the workhorse. That's fine. Martin's a viable pass catcher; he'll be effective on third down. On first and second down **he offers superb short-area explosiveness, good patience, and quickness to and through the hole.** With a veteran like Josh McCown under center, two willowy dynamos at receiver in Vincent Jackson and first-round rookie Mike Evans (Texas A&M), plus meaty second-round rookie tight end Austin Seferian-Jenkins (Washington), Martin is part of an offense that is loaded with playmaking potential.

TE JIMMY GRAHAM

12

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

One weapon in the backfield is gone, but he won't be missed much in a well-designed offensive attack

NFC SOUTH

The best way to learn more about the inner workings of football is to pay close attention to how teams line up. Formations rarely get discussed by broadcasters, but they're the DNA that dictates play design and creates key matchups, and they implicitly reveal how a team feels about its own players as well as its opponents'.

For an advanced lesson on formations, there's no better case study than the Saints. Part of coach Sean Payton's M.O. is to employ 15 different formations over his offense's first 15 plays—give or take—so that his assistants can chart how the defense responds to each one. Payton then bases much of his play-calling on that info.

This practice is not uncommon in the NFL, but New Orleans—given Payton's craftiness and quarterback Drew Brees's sagacity—is the best at it. And the assortment of formations does not stop at 15. The Saints simply have too many offensive looks for a defense to prepare for, and New Orleans is able to run those out of myriad personnel groupings thanks to its depth at running back, receiver and tight end. The Saints are bound to find favorable mismatches.

Even when the defense can decipher what's coming, there's this to deal with: Brees is as adept as anyone at clicking through progressions, and Payton is among the elite at constructing route combinations, particularly with screens, seam patterns, posts and deep crosses.

Most of these designs take time to unfold, which is why GM Mickey Loomis has invested heavily in his offensive line—or at least in the interior. (With a 6-foot quarterback who struggles to see over blockers and attackers, it's imperative that the pocket stays firm in

DERICK E. HINGLE/USA TODAY SPORTS (2)

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 11–5

WEEK 1
ATL
CLE
MIN
DAL
TB
BYE
MON
DET
GB
CAR
THUR
SF
CIN
BAL
MON
PIT
CAR
CHI
MON
ATL
TB
WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

the middle.) Guards Ben Grubbs and Jahri Evans earn more than three times what tackles Terron Armstead and Zach Strief earn. Payton's system makes great use of chip blocks (that is, quick double-team blocks from a back or a tight end as he releases into a route), so having elite tackles is not vital. These chips, by the way, are one reason the Saints use so many condensed formations.

Instrumental in many of those chip concepts is tight end Jimmy Graham, who is by far the Saints' most dynamic weapon. With his receiver's speed (4.56 40-yard dash) and tight end's size (6' 7", 265 pounds), Graham gives a formation versatility, and where he lines up often dictates how the defense lines up. Most corners are too small to cover him, most safeties are too slow, and there are fewer than five linebackers in the league who can contain him without help.

With such a refined system New Orleans doesn't *need* stars around Graham—but having more wouldn't hurt. The Saints hope, then, that rookie wideout Brandin Cooks can quickly become a threat. The darting, shifty first-rounder (Oregon State) will fill many of the underneath receiving duties once handled by Darren Sproles, who caught 232 passes over the past three seasons (an NFL high for a running back) before being traded to the Eagles in a cost-cutting move. New Orleans also needs Cooks to create his own opportunities against tight coverage on the outside—something that no one else, including decorated possession target Marques Colston, is capable of doing.

Cooks won't make many catches out of the backfield, like Sproles did, but the Saints won't need him to. Running back Pierre Thomas is an adept receiver, especially on screens, where he has an excellent sense of spacing and timing. Thomas is also a steady ballcarrier, though his touches will be limited in a backfield trio that includes Mark Ingram and Khiry Robinson. Ingram, the 2009 Heisman Trophy winner, has not fully panned out, but with perpetually fresh legs he can be a difficult downhill bouncer to corral. Robinson, a second-year pro with excellent burst and control, is viewed by many (including Payton's longtime mentor and friend Bill Parcells) as a budding star.

Distribution in Payton's deep, lavish offense will remain as diverse as the coach's formation usage. Last year, seven Saints had at least 450 yards from scrimmage—pretty much par for the course since Payton and Brees arrived in 2006.

And there will be opportunities for more in 2014. With New Orleans's defense coming to life under coordinator Rob Ryan, Brees won't always be compelled to score in a hurry. That should result in more balanced play-calling. The defense's awakening, by the way, has come about from having a rich variety of concepts and personnel groupings—and from a seemingly endless supply of formations. □

KEY CONCEPT Swarming

The swarming nature of the Saints' defense makes it appear as if they have a fierce pass rush. Look closely, though, and you'll see a front seven without any true edge specialists. The nearest thing they have is **Junior Galette**, a fifth-year outside linebacker with adequate speed but occasional bouts of ineffectiveness. Coordinator Rob Ryan compensates with keen blitz designs as well as blitz looks that wind up bringing only the standard four rushers. Despite the lack of raw edge speed, Ryan's full playbook is available mainly because he has fundamentally sound players up front, starting with tireless end **Cameron Jordan** and, opposite him, budding star **Akiem Hicks**, who was a top five run defender last season. At the very least, Jordan and Hicks can prevent run blockers from cleanly working their way up to the second level, allowing speedy inside linebackers **Curtis Lofton** and **David Hawthorne** to play in full-on attack mode, swarming freely.

THE CASE FOR Strong safety Kenny Vaccaro

The 2013 first-round pick does much more than his listed position suggests. Vaccaro is a deft slot defender, thanks to man-coverage skills honed at Texas and his **natural violence as a press-jammer and tackler**. He's also a heady linebacker, capable of slithering around bodies much as Charles Woodson did in his days as a Packer. And, of course, the 6' 215-pounder can also play the traditional strong and free safety roles just fine—but on his most creative days, coordinator Rob Ryan won't ask Vaccaro to do that. In the dime packages that Ryan loves, all three safeties get a chance to move around, which explains the acquisition of free-agent playmaker Jairus Byrd, a three-time Pro Bowler at safety in Buffalo. Interchangeable safeties are most dangerous playing alongside quality man-to-man corners. The Saints have one of those in Keenan Lewis, who is ascending toward the top echelon at his position. And they hope to get one or two more quality years out of Champ Bailey before the free-agent pickup's five-year countdown to Canton begins. The No. 3 corner spot is up in the air; Corey White figures to have the inside track. But thanks to the flexibility provided by Vaccaro, New Orleans can still be effective if no one emerges.

WR **JULIO JONES**

3

ATLANTA FALCONS

After an atypically awful season, they reaped a draft windfall. How much could it help? Remember the Alamo?

SOUTH

Think back to the NBA's Spurs of the mid-1990s, a team that was a perennial threat in the Western Conference playoffs. Then in the '96 preseason All-Star center David Robinson injured his back, and San Antonio face-planted, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Cast into the '97 draft lottery, the Spurs drew the No. 1 pick and came away with Tim Duncan. Suddenly they had two world-class big men—and, two years later, their first championship parade.

With good reason, Falcons fans hope to see the football version of this in 2014. Like those Spurs, this organization has been very competitive for most of the past six years, triggered by the arrival of GM Thomas Dimitroff, coach Mike Smith and quarterback Matt Ryan. But *very competitive* can be another way of saying *not great*. There's a championship hump to get over.

Last season electric wide receiver Julio Jones broke a screw in his surgically repaired right foot and was lost after Week 5. Pro Bowl wideout Roddy White suffered throughout 2013 from ankle and hamstring problems. And a slew of other vital contributors, including left tackle Sam Baker (12 games, knee), running back Steven Jackson (four games, thigh) and linebackers Sean Weatherspoon (nine games, foot) and Kroy Biermann (14 games, Achilles), were shelved for significant time. The upshot: a 4–12 face-plant in Atlanta.

That descent earned a very competitive team the No. 6 pick, which Dimitroff used on Texas A&M offensive tackle Jake Matthews. And while a tackle alone can't quite do for an organization what Duncan did for the Spurs, the rookie should at least rectify some of the pass-blocking

KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 4–12

WEEK 1

NO
CIN
TB (THUR)
MIN
NYG
CHI
BAL
DET (LONDON)
BYE
TB
CAR
CLE
ARI
GB (MON)
PIT
NO
CAR

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

weaknesses that have long hindered Atlanta's offense. Give Ryan time to throw, and factor in the return to health of Jones and White, and you suddenly have a proper title-contending offense.

In coordinator Dirk Koetter's system the quarterback needs a clean pocket. Yes, Ryan's diagnostic acumen in the presnap phase lets him know where he's throwing almost immediately. But this only helps on quick, three-step timing passes. The Falcons have two incredibly talented wideouts, and Koetter—when he's not dipping into his rich bag of screen passes—builds shrewd deep-intermediate route combinations around them. His play designs can strain defenses that try to double-team a wideout, and punish those that don't. But these deeper routes require five- or even seven-step drop-backs. Ryan, a sound but not rocket-armed passer, needs functional space to step into those throws.

Matthews will help give him that—though new challenges were presented when Baker was lost for the year (patellar tendon) in the preseason. Matthews must immediately jump in on the left side, opposite the ponderous Lamar Holmes. Dimitroff and Smith had clear intentions of getting stronger by signing former Chiefs guard Jon Asamoah, who plays bigger than his listed weight of 305. He'll replace Peter Konz, a 2012 second-round bust who has been a sieve in pass protection.

This is a line built to just survive in the passing game and dictate between the numbers on the ground. That fits the downhill style of Jackson, who at 31 is still a battering ram but no longer a home run threat.

With question marks all over their defensive front seven, the Falcons know they'll need to win aerial shootouts. In addition to Jones and White, slot receiver Harry Douglas is very effective on crossing patterns. And while future Hall of Fame tight end Tony Gonzalez has retired, Levine Toilolo, a fourth-round pick in 2013, gives them a similar style of target. Like Gonzalez, the 6' 8", 265-pound Toilolo doesn't have to get open to make catches.

With his two stallions back at receiver, Koetter can return to running a hurry-up offense out of balanced formations. If the Falcons align Jones and White opposite each other, they'll often have route designs that beat man coverage on one side and zone coverage on the other. All Ryan has to do is diagnose the defense and know which favorable matchup to exploit. Koetter is adept at anticipating an opponent's tendencies simply through his formation choices. Against more unpredictable defenses, he'll switch to an unbalanced three-by-one set, which, with two standout receivers, all but guarantees that the D will simplify its coverages.

If everything comes together, the Falcons are capable of getting over the same hump that the Spurs finally got over 15 years ago. □

TOM DIPACE

FOCUS ON Mike Nolan's bag of tricks

Just because Nolan, Atlanta's defensive coordinator, is altering his scheme, from a hybrid into more of a 3–4, that doesn't mean he'll throw away his myriad coverage rotations and blitz exchange concepts—that kind of trickery is how he built his reputation. The Falcons drafted two man-oriented cornerbacks last year (**Desmond Trufant** in round 1, **Robert Alford** in round 2) because they wanted more freedom in deciding how to deploy their safeties and how to manufacture a pass rush. Trufant is a star in the making, and Alford has shown serious upside. Nolan should have even more chicanery up his sleeve this year, and most of that will involve the safeties, his favorite interchangeable weapons. Atlanta spent a third-round pick in May on **Dezmen Southward** (Wisconsin), who the team hopes can adapt quickly and supplant stop-gap veteran free safety Dwight Lowery. Whichever one plays, he'll be joined by **William Moore**, one of football's fiercest downhill missiles. That combination in the secondary is something Nolan can build around.

THE CASE FOR Defensive end Jonathan Babineaux

Babineaux is the best active veteran of five or more years never to have made a Pro Bowl. In fact, **he's one of the league's best D-linemen, period**. He brings a rare burst, a know-how for shedding blocks, the nimbleness to redirect in traffic and a second gear for closing in on targets. He flashes these traits all four quarters, every single week. You can add versatility to that list, too, as last season he moved from his longtime tackle position to strongside end without a hitch. That was great training for 2014. Wanting to get brawnier up front, coordinator Mike Nolan is switching from a hybrid 4–3 to a true 3–4. To make that work the Falcons signed free-agent nose Paul Soliai and drafted the risky but talented Ra'Shede Hageman (Minnesota) as an understudy. They also inked end Tyson Jackson, who played in a similar scheme with the Chiefs. Jackson and Babineaux will often align head-up on offensive tackles, leaving them to clog the gaps on both sides of those linemen. It's crucial that they dominate these battles; the Falcons lack experienced outside 'backers and are relying on undrafted second-year pros Joplo Bartu and Paul Worrilow inside. Overlooked though he may be, Babineaux is the type of guy who can make this new scheme work.

QB CAM NEWTON

4

CAROLINA PANTHERS

On the rise the past few seasons, they have huge holes on offense that could easily cause them to plunge

NFC SOUTH

It's not too hard identifying which teams are primed to take a step forward. The tougher task—the one that requires looking below the surface—is identifying the ones likely to take a step *backward*. Here, the key ingredients include losing veteran leaders, downgrading at important positions and displaying glaring weaknesses that have been patched over with still-developing players.

Carolina checks all three boxes. Left tackle Jordan Gross (retired) and receiver Steve Smith (cut), both reliable veterans, are gone. So is secondary leader Captain Munnerlyn, who signed with the Vikings. Along with Smith, Branden LaFell and Ted Ginn also exited, leaving a gaping pass-catching hole that general manager Dave Gettleman stop-gapped with free agents Jerricho Cotchery and Jason Avant, two thirtysomethings who, because of their limited speed, are merely possession targets. Gettleman also used his first-round draft pick on 6' 5", 240-pound Kelvin Benjamin, a Plaxico Burress type who, after just one productive year at Florida State, is no guarantee to make an immediate impact.

In Gross's stead the Panthers will try their luck with the heavy-footed Byron Bell, who moves over from right tackle—which now becomes a position of concern. For Munnerlyn in the slot, they'll go with either converted safety Charles Godfrey (coming off an Achilles injury) or fifth-round rookie Bené Benwikere (San Jose State). Are you starting to see a pattern? Young, untested players, plugging holes.

On defense, that won't be as much of an issue; the fresh talent will have the support of ends Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy, as well as captain Luke Kuechly, who in his third season already

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 12–4

WEEK 1

TB
DET
PIT
BAL
CHI
CIN
GB
SEA
NO THUR
PHI MON
ATL
BYE
MIN
NO
TB
CLE
ATL

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

carries the title of Best Linebacker in Football. Carolina finished second to the Seahawks in points allowed last year (15.1 per game) and did not give up a first-half touchdown until Week 9, a feat matched just once in the previous 78 years. This unit, however, will have to be even better in 2014 because the young leader of the Panthers' offense doesn't provide the sort of stability that Kuechly lends the defense.

Cam Newton's running prowess is top-notch, and his arm strength is unquestioned, but those traits aren't always enough to overcome poor mechanics and inconsistency in reading the field. Three seasons after being drafted No. 1, Newton has a bad tendency to stick with his initial option for too long and lose his sense of the play design. These flaws lead to an unreliable offense, which is trouble given Carolina's lack of pass-catching talent.

Because his receivers are unable to consistently create windows on their own, coordinator Mike Shula will have to get them open through play design. That calls for intertwined route combinations and defined progression reads for the quarterback, and it means that Newton has to play with better fundamentals and discipline than he's shown. It's also imperative that Newton be supported by a strong rushing attack. The Panthers have put up solid numbers on the ground in recent years, but a large chunk of that production has come from Newton's scrambling. In reality, this offense has not established a foundational, week-in-and-week-out ground game, and too many of its staple plays are based on gimmicky read-option concepts.

In fairness to Shula, those read-options do fit the personnel. With either DeAngelo Williams or a (hopefully) healthy Jonathan Stewart at tailback, bowling-ball runner Mike Tolbert at fullback and Newton handling the snap, Carolina's backfield boasts three formidable rushing threats that defenses must account for, and Shula does a commendable job of crafting multidimensional designs around them. Those plays, however, need to be supplemented with more basic ideas, what NFL playcallers refer to as "attitude" runs, such as dives, counters and powers.

A firmer rushing attack—which, from a blocker's viewpoint, is less about athleticism than it is about brute force—would alleviate pressure on an offensive line that, aside from four-time Pro Bowl center Ryan Kalil, is ill-equipped to survive on its own in pass protection. The hope: that improvements in the running game can offset losses in the passing attack.

That might be wishful thinking for a team that shows every sign of regression. But if the D can top what it did one year ago (no small order), Carolina will be in plenty of close battles. With shrewd, aggressive game management from coach Ron Rivera and a playmaker at quarterback, it's not impossible for this team to muster a few extra wins.

It just won't be easy. □

STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

MAJOR CONCERN The secondary

The Panthers don't have the defensive backfield to win in man coverage, so you can expect them to continue playing a fairly vanilla zone scheme—granted, one that mixes in selective blitzes. Unless talented but tentative free-agent pickup **Antoine Cason** (Cardinals) recaptures his form from several years ago, the cornerbacking unit will take a significant hit. Captain Munnerlyn, who signed with Minnesota, was Carolina's most impactful starter on the outside and its only capable man defender in the slot. The safety position is no less feeble. Falcons castoff **Thomas DeCoud** will be asked to patrol centerfield—something he's done with mixed results. In the box, former Saint **Roman Harper** can be a stout tackler and blitzer, but his vulnerability in coverage could lead to more snaps for **Robert Lester**, an undrafted second-year pro who's not immune to mistakes himself. The Panthers, in other words, will need their star-studded front seven to bolster a patchwork defensive backfield.

THE CASE FOR Middle linebacker Luke Kuechly

In winning the Defensive Rookie of the Year (2012) and Defensive Player of the Year ('13) awards, Kuechly demonstrated a diagnostic ability that's off the charts, as well as speed and quickness. He identifies run plays before they unfold and attacks the line of scrimmage fast enough to prevent blockers from staying on double teams against Carolina's front four defenders. In short, Kuechly is **the best middle linebacker in football, by far.** It certainly helps that he has a strong cast around him. Leading the front four is fifth-year end Greg Hardy, whose combination of power and quickness—off the edge and inside—led to 15 sacks last season. On the opposite side Charles Johnson is a steady edge stopper who in recent years has developed pass-rushing skills at defensive tackle (which he often plays in nickel). Kony Ealy, a second-round rookie from Missouri, will further buttress the pass rush, alongside last year's first-round pick, Star Lotulelei, whose quickness off the snap makes him difficult to block one-on-one. And next to Kuechly is 10th-year man Thomas Davis, whose coverage acumen helps give Carolina the league's best nickel linebacking tandem. But as good as this front seven is, the Panthers' defense would fall apart without its superstar captain in the middle.

FS EARL THOMAS

1

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The reigning champions look primed to repeat, and it's because their defense puts its safeties first

NFC WEST

Before the Seahawks, the last team to win a Super Bowl through such dominant defense was the 2002 Buccaneers. Since that time there have also been few champions better positioned to defend their title. Seattle is young, and the natural maturation of quarterback Russell Wilson in his third season plus the infusion of playmaking from a now-healthy Percy Harvin put their average offense on a path to improvement. That said, another title will depend on the overwhelming defense.

Every Seahawks defender who was lost this off-season was more than adequately replaced from within. More important, two key cogs were locked up for the long-term: cornerback Richard Sherman (four years, $56 million, $40 million of it guaranteed) and free safety Earl Thomas (four years, $40 million, $27.7 million guaranteed). The loquacious Sherman is the guy everyone knows, but most coaches will tell you that Thomas is what makes this defense go.

Free safeties are often overlooked by fans and analysts, and understandably so: They don't always show up in the television picture and are rarely near the ball. But a great free safety influences games in profound ways, and after Ed Reed, Thomas is the best this generation has seen. A first-round pick in 2010, he has learned to translate his sensational speed into outstanding range with his understanding of route concepts and angles. Also, he explodes in his redirect movement, which helps in disguising coverage. Quarterbacks are taught to read the free safety before anything else. Fearing Thomas's disguises, they're inclined to keep eyes on him a beat longer, wasting precious time and aiding Seattle's four-man pass rush.

This is a subtle factor that makes

JOSHUA WEISBERG/ICON SMI

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 13-3

WEEK 1

GB THUR

SD

DEN

BYE

WAS MON

DAL

STL

CAR

OAK

NYG

KC

ARI

SF THUR

PHI

SF

ARI

STL

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

an entire defense better. Thomas's range means the Seahawks can almost always play single-high coverage, so they don't need to keep another safety back deep. That gives them an all-important eighth defender in the box: Kam Chancellor, who has blossomed into perhaps the finest strong safety in the game. Chancellor is devastatingly physical, fundamentally sound and adroit in coverage, both in man-to-man on tight ends and as a roving zone defender underneath.

That roving coverage is a staple in Seattle's ballyhooed hybrid zone and press-man scheme. The zone element is inside, where the areas of responsibility for Chancellor and Seattle's three speedy linebackers are smaller than is typical. That's because two suffocating press-man corners—Sherman and now Byron Maxwell, replacing Brandon Browner, who signed with New England this off-season—compress the field from the perimeter. They can be aggressive because of the security Thomas provides behind them. Without an All-Pro centerfielder, Sherman would have a much tougher time playing like an All-Pro corner.

Thomas, who is also a bone-rattling run defender, is the most important of this defense's pieces, but he's far from the sole reason for Seattle's success. This unit is extremely well-coached. You see it not only in the safeties' and linebackers' feel for working together in zone coverage but also in the success of the corners. Sherman was a fifth-round pick. Maxwell was a sixth-rounder. So was Jeremy Lane, who will be taking over slot duties from the departed Walter Thurmond, who was a fourth-rounder. Departed Pro Bowl corner Browner wasn't even drafted.

How do the Seahawks keep hitting home runs with their cornerbacks? It can't all be John Schneider's eye for talent, even if the 43-year-old is one of the best GMs in the league. It has to be the way these guys are coached. Pete Carroll, defensive coordinator Dan Quinn and secondary coach Kris Richard are very good at teaching their corners the specifics of press-man and off-man zone techniques. A telltale sign: Every Seahawks corner plays with the same mechanics. Part of those mechanics includes grabbing and holding because these coaches have figured out that human nature inhibits referees from flagging the same infraction over and over—regardless of the league's emphasis this year on calling passing fouls.

The Seahawks can play the same man-zone scheme down after down, which allows players to master the nuances. It also means more blitz possibilities, though with a potent four-man rush, Carroll and Quinn do not exercise these aside from some select third-down packages.

Another Super Bowl run is all the more plausible because scheme and instruction and the application of fundamentals are things that can carry over from year to year—especially when there's a dominant free safety linking the defense together. □

Open the Google app and say, "**Ok Google**, what is the name of the Seattle Seahawks' mascot?"

FOCUS ON The front seven

Seattle's defensive front seven undoubtedly benefits from playing in front of the best secondary in football. But even if it were playing in front of the defensive backfield of the Arena Football League's Spokane Shock, this group would be dominant. The line is rich with pass rushers: **Cliff Avril** and **Bruce Irvin** outside, and **Michael Bennett**, with his plethora of gap-shooting maneuvers, inside. Assuming defensive tackle **Tony McDaniel** can adequately replace departed weakside end Red Bryant, this group will remain difficult to run against. Bennett is terrific at shedding blocks as a first- and second-down defensive end, and defensive tackle **Brandon Mebane** plays with a near-perfect combination of leverage and quickness. At linebacker, Bobby Wagner runs like a deer and astutely diagnoses plays (both run and pass) from the middle. Outside, **K.J. Wright, Malcolm Smith** and Irvin bring tremendous speed, and complete a magnificent seven.

THE CASE FOR Receiver Percy Harvin

A thundering defense allows the Seahawks to win with a ball-control offense, which is what the still-developing Russell Wilson and workhorse running back Marshawn Lynch have provided. But this year **Wilson and Lynch could be used in new dimensions now that Harvin is healthy.** Harvin, whom the Seahawks acquired from Minnesota last off-season and signed to a six-year deal with $25.5 million guaranteed, would have been this offense's most dynamic weapon last year if not for hip problems that kept him out for all but 10 quarters (counting the postseason). While he gives Seattle a downfield target, Pete Carroll and GM John Schneider paid so much for Harvin because he could bring a horizontal element to the ground and screen games. Imagine Wilson running an already potent read-option with Lynch in the backfield and then having one of the most dangerous speedsters in the league sweeping in from the outside, adding a third ballhandling threat. That's a nightmare for a defense. Harvin gives Seattle greater big-play potential.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

WR MICHAEL CRABTREE

10

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The next step for a team that for the past two years has verged on domination? A new passing attack

NFC WEST

San Francisco recognizes what so many other NFL teams do not: If you're not evolving, you're falling behind. And so, despite having reached the NFC championship game in three straight seasons, Jim Harbaugh's 49ers appear to be updating their offensive approach in 2014. Here's the scary part: Harbaugh (a former quarterback) and coordinator Greg Roman (a one-of-a-kind tactician) are already two of the best running-game architects in football; they should have no trouble improving what's already a crafty passing attack.

To propagate their new approach, GM Trent Baalke, who entered draft week with a league-high 12 picks, dealt a fourth-rounder to the Bills for wideout Stevie Johnson and used another fourth-rounder on South Carolina receiver Bruce Ellington. Johnson, 28, is effective inside but can also play outside, allowing veteran Anquan Boldin to work the slot, where he's most dangerous. That's also where you're likely to see Ellington, who's noted for his quickness, though he may have a tough time leapfrogging those near the top of the depth chart.

There's no confusion, however, over the Niners' primary target: Michael Crabtree will almost never come off the field. With his pliability and quickness, he's the only wideout on the roster who can consistently shake man coverage. The rest of this group—including Johnson and Boldin, who at least can make contested catches—have to be helped by play design.

That's nothing new for Harbaugh and Roman, whose quarterback also requires the aid of play design. Colin Kaepernick's long-striding speed and quick-twitch athleticism give him sensational mobility, and he has a rocket-

SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

launcher arm. But these attributes are in constant battle with the 26-year-old's still unrefined fundamentals and limited awareness.

To be blunt: Kaepernick's pocket poise and mechanics are severely underdeveloped. He too often breaks down to run even before reaching the top of his drop. And if his first read isn't open, a play immediately becomes haphazard. His positive traits make him worth the effort, however, so Harbaugh and Roman are forced to design around this and around the fact that Kaepernick, entering his third season as a starter, reads only half the field. Sometimes not even that.

Yet Kaepernick has far exceeded his limitations. In fact, his state of imperfection has led to some mind-boggling improvisations and has helped get San Francisco within sniffing distance of the Lombardi Trophy every year. Keep in mind: Kaepernick has also benefited from a strong defense and running attack. Such tremendous support won't last forever.

So what is Harbaugh to do? Allow his quarterback to play fast and loose and hope that's enough? Or try to build more stability in Kaepernick's game?

Right now the plan seems to be the latter. Roman has intimated that the Niners could use more spread-oriented passing concepts—a scheme he has the resources for, especially considering that his wide receiving corps is buttressed by Vernon Davis. The Pro Bowl tight end attracts extra coverage down the middle and, with his ability to split outside and win one-on-ones, lends versatility to formations.

But while Roman can stay up late concocting the most cutting-edge aerial attack known to man, at some point a truly pass-oriented system is going to demand more sound quarterbacking.

If the Niners want to change their style, they at least have a safety net when Kaepernick flounders: the run-first approach that has served them well the past three years. Running back Frank Gore is 31, but he still operates at a high level. With a game predicated on vision, timing and setting up blocks, he can remain effective even if his speed and quickness abate. Should Gore run out of gas, San Francisco has a similarly styled replacement in this year's second-round pick, Ohio State's Carlos Hyde.

The Niners also re-signed lead blocker Bruce Miller, an invaluable, multifaceted fullback who, along with No. 2 tight end Vance McDonald, provides much of the dimension in a ground game that's long been the league's most powerful and diverse.

That power comes from a front five led by two Pro Bowlers on the left side: tackle Joe Staley and guard Mike Iupati, who broke his left fibula in the NFC championship game but appears to be 100%. And the diversity? That comes from a quarterback who, despite being tremendously green, is still the scariest raw playmaker in the NFL, no matter what system he plays in. □

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 12–4

WEEK 1

DAL

CHI

ARI

PHI

KC

STL MON

DEN

BYE

STL

NO

NYG

WAS

SEA THUR

OAK

SEA

SD SAT

ARI

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

DILIP VISHWANAT/GETTY IMAGES

MAJOR CONCERN The front seven

The future is unclear for inside linebacker **NaVorro Bowman**, who's unlikely to play before midseason. While referees reviewed a fumble call in the NFC championship game last January, TV viewers cringed as Fox showed a replay of the All-Pro's left leg snapping under a pileup. For years Bowman and **Patrick Willis** hallmarked the 49ers' stifling nickel-based D with their ability to play man coverage, rare for their positions. With Bowman out, the scheme very well could change—but the pass rush won't. Its foundation: stunts and twists from double-team eaters **Justin Smith** and **Ray McDonald**, plus devastating edge attacking by **Aldon Smith** and **Ahmad Brooks**. The formidability of these four-man-rush tactics has often negated a need for blitzing. But that won't always be the case in 2014, as Smith is expected to be suspended at some point. When the Niners blitzed in the past, Bowman was often the key guy because he handled the running back in man. Now that versatile force is MIA.

THE CASE FOR Free safety Eric Reid

The offense isn't the only unit undergoing a change in San Francisco. Long centered around stingy man-to-man, the defense will use a larger range of coverages in 2014. This shift actually began late last season, when coordinator Vic Fangio put his men in a variety of zones, some of them hybrid with man coverage. With three of his top four corners from last year gone, GM Trent Baalke is relying more on the off-season investments he made at safety: Antoine Bethea (from the Colts) and first-round rookie Jimmie Ward (Northern Illinois). Both will play second fiddle to Reid, a 2013 first-round pick who showed last year that **he's a ferocious downhill hitter, an instinctive route reader, a ball hawk** and an astute student of the game. The Niners are the first team since 1979–80 to draft first-round safeties in consecutive years. All this suggests that San Francisco is committing to more zone concepts (which put added weight on a safety's deployment) but also to a three-safety dime package. That will replace the two-linebacker nickel that's been key to this D's success, but that was weakened by the loss of linebacker NaVorro Bowman. These are dramatic changes—changes that probably wouldn't happen if Reid hadn't shown star potential.

CB PATRICK PETERSON

3

ARIZONA CARDINALS

A dangerous defense combines boatloads of talent with a design that is brilliantly deceptive

NFC WEST

Some defensive coordinators use disguised looks and pressures to hide a weakness, but for Todd Bowles, who's in his second season running the D in Arizona, deception is simply a preferred style of play.

This year, though Bowles has two new weak spots to consider: defensive end, where hard-charging veteran Darnell Dockett is out for the season with a torn ACL, and inside linebacker, where Daryl Washington drew a year-long suspension for violating the league's substance-abuse policy. (Washington in the off-season also pleaded guilty to assaulting the mother of his child, so there's no promise he'll be back next season either.)

Fortunately, Bowles has stars remaining in his 3–4 defense. Up front, long-armed seventh-year veteran Calais Campbell is a monster, although he'll receive more attention from blockers with Dockett out. On the back end, All-Pro Patrick Peterson might be the best pure man-to-man corner in the league. He rarely requires safety help, giving the rest of the stellar secondary a chance to be spectacular. At cornerback opposite Peterson will be lanky veteran Antonio Cromartie, who was signed to a one-year deal. Then there's safety Tyrann Mathieu, who was recently activated from the PUP list and could be back in September from the torn ACL and LCL he suffered last December. The Honey Badger may have the best combination of quickness, versatility and instincts of any defensive back to enter the league in the last dozen years.

Bowles deploys this talent in an array of aggressive and creative pressure packages. He's seeking quarterback sacks, of course, but schemes like this are about much

CHRIS O'MEARA/AP

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 10–6

WEEK 1
SD MON
NYG
SF
BYE
DEN
WAS
OAK
PHI
DAL
STL
DET
SEA
ATL
KC
STL THUR
SEA
SF
WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

more. By bringing pressure—or simply by threatening it—a defense can force the offense to play faster than it wants to, making it more likely to abandon a play's structure and rush decisions. This leads to incompletions, sacks or, ideally, turnovers. All of them will get an offense off the field quickly, which is the essence of good defense.

While most pressure designs require man coverage, the Cardinals may feel inclined to use more zone coverage this season for the sake of variety, though Cromartie's adeptness in man-to-man and Peterson's excellence as a shutdown press corner doesn't make it essential. (Both Peterson and Cromartie are unrefined in zone coverage anyway.) When Mathieu returns, he'll play free safety in the base 3–4 alongside either Tony Jefferson or intimidating first-round rookie strong safety Deone Bucannon out of Washington State. In the nickel, Mathieu will slide down into the slot, where he's a dangerous blitzer and is effective playing trail-technique man coverage with help over the top.

Confidence in the secondary is somewhat offset by concerns at linebacker. On the inside, untested Kevin Minter, a second-round pick in 2013, is joining 13-year veteran Larry Foote, who is coming off a ruptured biceps that wiped out most of his '13 season. They are replacing absent stars Washington and Karlos Dansby (who left for the Browns as a free agent). Talent is also thin on the outside, except for 36-year-old weakside edge rusher John Abraham, who surprised with 11½ sacks last year.

When the Cardinals have the ball they will be under the guidance of coach Bruce Arians, one of the NFL's best passing-game architects. Arians also has weak areas to account for, especially on the offensive line, which was inadequate a year ago. Though Arizona should improve on the left side with long-armed free-agent pickup Jared Veldheer at tackle and 2013 first-round pick Jonathan Cooper, who is back from a season-ending broken left leg, at guard, the Cardinals' front five still has problems. Center Lyle Sendlein, an eight-year veteran, lacks strength, and the right-side starters Paul Fanaika and Bobby Massie lack athleticism. This puts added pressure (often literally) on quarterback Carson Palmer who, entering his 12th season, is smart but still too hit-or-miss.

But like Bowles, Arians does have his playmakers—namely future Hall of Fame receiver Larry Fitzgerald and future star running back Andre Ellington. These players will only flourish if Arians maintains his high level of schematic diversity.

Diversity will define both offense and defense for a Cardinals team that could be better than it was a year ago, when it went 10–6. But it still has the daunting task of overcoming powerhouse division rivals San Francisco and Seattle. No amount of diversity will make that happen. □

SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

FOCUS ON The passing game

In year 10, **Larry Fitzgerald** is still the Cardinals' scariest weapon—and coach Bruce Arians knows it. That's why upon taking over in 2013, he made the superstar the "Z" receiver in his scheme. This means that instead of aligning in a stagnant stance on the line of scrimmage as he used to do, the eight-time Pro Bowler now operates on the move and from a variety of locations, usually tight to the formation. It's the same role Arians cast Hines Ward and Reggie Wayne in when he directed the offenses in Pittsburgh and Indianapolis. By moving Fitzgerald, Arians can more readily build route combinations around him, knowing that other receivers, such as **Michael Floyd** and 2014 third-rounder **John Brown** out of Pittsburg (Kans.) State won't be the defense's focus. Last season Floyd, a first-round pick in '12, emerged as a deep-intermediate threat in this system, catching 65 balls for 1,041 yards. Much of that production can be attributed to the attention defenses paid to Fitzgerald, who still had 82 catches for 954 yards.

THE CASE FOR Running back Andre Ellington

When Rashard Mendenhall walked away from football after the 2013 season at age 26, Arizona's running back duties fell to Ellington—who might well have taken over even if Mendenhall had stayed. Ellington, a sixth-round pick last year who averaged a league-best 5.5 yards on 118 carries, showed sparkling potential as a multifaceted weapon out of the backfield and as a receiver in the slot or out wide. He has great control of his quickness and stop-start maneuvers, can turn to the perimeter on a dime and has lateral agility that can embarrass even the soundest of tacklers. Capping these talents with breakaway speed, **Ellington gives an otherwise bland Cardinals rushing attack home run potential.** That said, Ellington's receiving abilities could prove more valuable to an offense that, under passing-game aficionado Bruce Arians, frequently shifts into empty backfield sets. Ellington is a deft enough route runner to win one-on-one matchups against cornerbacks, much less safeties or linebackers. He can be the ultimate chess piece in a system predicated on creating matchup problems.

DE ROBERT QUINN

4

ST. LOUIS RAMS

Another draft, yet another direction. That's cause for alarm as the clock ticks on the Jeff Fisher era

NFC WEST

With the second pick of the 2014 draft, St. Louis selected tackle Greg Robinson, the most physically imposing offensive lineman to enter the league since Leonard Davis in '01. The choice makes perfect sense when you consider the way the Rams played over the final three quarters of '13. After their new spread offense gained no traction early on, coordinator Brian Schottenheimer committed to a straightforward between-the-tackles rushing attack down the stretch. Sam Bradford's torn left ACL in Week 7 cemented that approach.

It will remain the Rams' foundation in 2014. Even before Bradford retore his ACL last Saturday in St. Louis's third preseason game, coach Jeff Fisher and his staff decided that a ball-control offense best suited their personnel. That could explain why the team drafted Robinson (Auburn) to play alongside veteran linemen Jake Long and Rodger Saffold (two formidable run blockers who suffered notable injuries last year) and why, aside from third-round pick Tre Mason (also Auburn), they made no significant changes to a backfield that features Zac Stacy, a fifth-round pick in '13.

With Shaun Hill tabbed as the interim signal-caller, this is an offense that will be asked simply not to lose games. Typically, that's not enough in today's era of wide-open football. But when you're shorthanded on offense and have a dynamic, playmaking unit on the other side of the ball, it's the best (if only) approach. That defense, which will be coordinated by Fisher's longtime confidant, Gregg Williams (two years removed from a bounty scandal), boasts what is unmistakably the best front four in the NFL. That starts with end Robert Quinn, who has already established himself as far and away football's quickest,

OTTO GREULE JR/GETTY IMAGES

2014 SCHEDULE

2013 Record: 7–9

WEEK 1

MIN

TB

DAL

BYE

PHI

SF (MON)

SEA

KC

SF

ARI

DEN

SD

OAK

WAS

ARI (THUR)

NYG

SEA

WEEK 17

HOME AWAY

most supple—and therefore most feared—edge force. Williams loves to blitz, but with Quinn and a nickel D-line that's made up of deserving first-rounders, he won't have to.

Because Quinn commands double teams outside and can dominate inside (as a tackle, stand-up joker or however else Williams might use him), the Rams' arsenal of twist and stunt pass-rushing concepts is nearly unstoppable. Executing those, often against one-on-one blockers, will be sturdy end Chris Long, strong-handed tackle Michael Brockers and, on passing downs, quick-twitch rookie Aaron Donald (Pittsburgh). Likely starting ahead of Donald in the base 4–3 will be Kendall Langford, who has deft mechanics and impressive movement skills lining up in a multitude of spots. Providing high-quality depth is Eugene Sims, as well as seventh-year veteran William Hayes. Both are versatile and good lateral movers, which is crucial because Williams will feature a variety of personnel groupings and alignments here.

The back end is where it gets tricky. With a potent four-man rush, Williams will focus much of his creative energy on his back seven, where players will have to excel in coverage exchanges, rotations and disguises. This is challenging enough for a veteran unit, never mind one as young as St. Louis's. The most gifted physical specimen in that group, 2013 first-round pick Alec Ogletree, will be key. But while Williams won't find a better movable chess piece, Ogletree's awareness at this point could limit him to being just a pawn.

In the secondary, risk-taking corners Janoris Jenkins and Trumaine Johnson (who'll likely miss the first quarter of the season with a sprained left MCL) are entering their third seasons, and nickelback Lamarcus Joyner is a second-round rookie. Joyner is another movable piece, given his experience playing the slot and safety at Florida State. The safety he'd replace in a base 4–3 is third-year pro Rodney McLeod. Even younger than McLeod is lanky strong safety T.J. McDonald, who covers plenty of ground but who must develop more dimension.

That's a ton of inexperience, but a young secondary is the type of weakness that can be offset by an explosive pass rush. With opposing QBs being rushed into quick throws, there will be plenty of plant-and-drive opportunities for this aggressive group of ball hawks—especially the corners. In many pressure-based D's, corners don't have big-play opportunities because the ball is coming out quickly only by the force of a blitz. And when blitzing, it's often mandatory to play press-man coverage so as to disrupt the receiver's timing early in the route and also to account for the fact that there are fewer defenders left on the back end. This nullifies most zone concepts. But that's not the case in St. Louis. A malleable, electric four-man rush leaves plenty of bodies in coverage and more room for gambling.

With the offense just trying to control games, mostly in three-to-six-yard chunks, the defensive side is where the Rams' gambling will happen this season. □

MICHAEL CONROY/AP

CAUSE FOR CONCERN The wide receivers

When you employ basic two-back or two-tight-end formations and run a ball-control offense, as the Rams do, your wide receivers must be able to separate off the line on the outside. The diminutive Tavon Austin is not the only Rams receiver who struggles here. **Chris Givens**, a downfield speedster, is an unpolished route runner, which is why he's fallen behind last year's third-round pick, **Stedman Bailey**, and 2012 second-rounder **Brian Quick** on the depth chart. Bailey remains somewhat of a mystery at the NFL level; Quick must learn to play with better body compactness in order to explode downfield. Also contending for reps is **Austin Pettis**, a fairly ordinary possession target. And then there's **Kenny Britt**, the biggest surprise of training camp. The free-agent pickup showed the type of burst that once made him a promising star under Jeff Fisher in Tennessee. (Britt had nine TDs in '10, their last year together.) Injuries and immaturity all but derailed Britt over the last three seasons, but if he can stay on the field, he could be the only Rams receiver capable of consistently separating off the line.

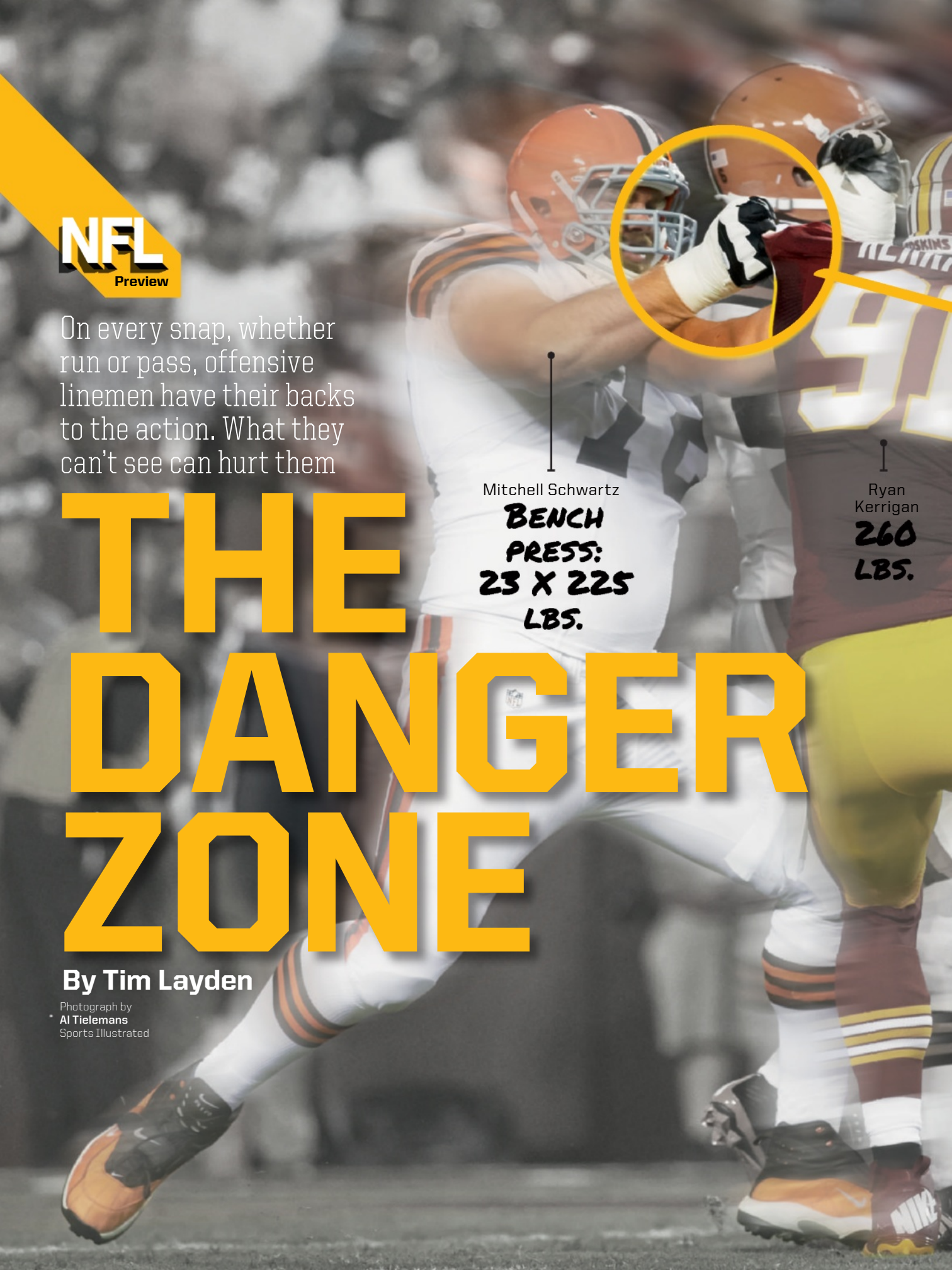
THE CASE FOR Receiver Tavon Austin

At 5' 8", 176 pounds, Austin, we've learned, simply can't flourish in the NFL if he has to come off the line of scrimmage in traditional wide receiver fashion; it's too much of a challenge for him to consistently beat press coverage. If the Rams want to get any value out of their multipick, first-round investment from 2013, they must revisit some of the spread concepts they installed heading into last season. Austin is lethal in space, but the play designs must help afford him that space. Besides putting him in motion and out of the slot, another way to create space is by bringing Austin out of the backfield. This gives him even more initial room to work with and almost always gets him matched up against a linebacker or a safety. (The Eagles found success doing this last year, for example, with DeSean Jackson.) From the backfield Austin can take toss sweeps and reverses or catch swing passes. The idea: Get him the ball in a way that makes the play's structure more like that of a punt return. **Even threatening to use Austin in this way is enough to worry a defense.**

NFL Preview

On every snap, whether run or pass, offensive linemen have their backs to the action. What they can't see can hurt them

THE DANGER ZONE



By Tim Layden

Photograph by
Al Tielemans
Sports Illustrated

CRASH COURSE
As Browns left tackle Joe Thomas (73) knows, a planted leg is one that can get rolled up.

A LA CART Joeckel (above) broke his leg for the second time; Snee (right) tore his labrum and was forced to retire at 32.

On the 12th play of his first NFL start at left tackle last October, Jaguars rookie Luke Joeckel was assigned to block a basic outside zone running play for Maurice Jones-Drew. At the snap, Joeckel drove three lateral steps into the chest of Rams defensive end Robert Quinn, who was lined up more than a yard to his outside. The two men quickly became locked in a sumo-esque stalemate. As Jones-Drew hit the hole inside Joeckel, defensive tackle Kendall Langford darted from the opposite side and dived across Jones-Drew's back. Langford slipped sideways off Jones-Drew like a cartoon commuter grabbing the door handle of a moving bus, his legs windmilling until his left hip crashed into the bottom of Joeckel's right leg, which was planted in the artificial turf. The run netted one yard.

As other players climbed to their feet, Joeckel sat up and scuttled along the ground with the palms of his hands, moving away from the pile. He knew instantly that he had broken his leg because it had happened before, in much the same way, when he was a sophomore at Arlington (Texas) High. "Pile fell onto the back of my leg," Joeckel recalls. He broke his left tibia then; this time it was his right fibula, and his season was over. "Both times, I had no idea it was coming," says Joeckel. "That's the way it always is when you get rolled up."

That's what they call it: Getting rolled up. The phrase is invoked to describe any incidental harm inflicted on the legs of NFL offensive linemen while they perform their unglamorous trench work. It is what takes place when a giant man has lodged his foot in the earth to block for a teammate on a run or a pass, only to have some part of that play's conclusion spill onto his static limb, snapping it like a dry piece of kindling and/or shredding the ligaments inside. These random acts, often occurring on the periphery of the action, are committed against men—sometimes against teammates—who can't see them coming because they work blind to the mayhem behind them. "It's the only position in all of sports where your back is to the object of the game on every single play," says Howard Mudd, 72, an All-Pro offensive lineman in the 1960s and a respected O-line coach for four decades after that. "You don't see what's happening except right in front of you."

It is one of the most violent acts on a football field, yet in contrast to the most dangerous head blows, late hits or cut blocks, there's no movement to legislate roll-ups out of the game. They are the unintended consequence of heaving nearly 3,000 pounds of flesh, bone and dietary supplements into combat more than 100 times every game. "People see these devastating collisions all over the field where nobody

TOM GANNAM/AP

JIM O'CONNOR/USA TODAY SPORTS

gets hurt and everybody walks away fine," says Patriots offensive tackle Nate Solder. "And then we go down when somebody accidentally falls on us."

INCIDENT REPORT: The Textbook Pile Roll-up

Right guard Chris Snee of the Giants had missed just a single start in eight seasons—three of them as a Pro Bowl selection—when he lined up to block a running play against the Falcons in Week 15 of the 2012 season. As rookie back David Wilson attacked the middle of the line, Snee engaged in a stand-up territorial draw with defensive tackle Corey Peters. But Atlanta defensive end John Abraham steamed off the corner behind Snee, wrapped up Wilson behind the line of scrimmage and bulldogged him into Snee's left hip. Snee buckled backward, walked gingerly off the field and did not return. He started the final two games of the season but underwent surgery in the off-season to repair a torn hip labrum, the first in a series of injuries that hastened Snee's retirement in late July of this year.

It is one of the most violent acts on a football field, yet there's no movement to legislate roll-ups out of the game.

Snee, 30 at the time and in his eighth year in the NFL, had played enough football and blocked enough running plays to understand what might happen. "When you're in a stalemate with a guy at the line of scrimmage," says Snee, "and you're not going anywhere, and he's not going anywhere, and the running back hasn't gone by you either, those are clear signs that he's probably right behind you. And in this case, he was."

Every offensive lineman has an acutely developed awareness of the rhythm of a play. As time passes following the snap—four seconds, five seconds—the likelihood of getting rolled up increases. Steelers offensive line coach Mike Munchak, a Hall of Fame guard with the Houston Oilers from 1982 to '93 and the Titans' coach from 2011 to '13, calls it "Spidey sense," in reference to Spider-Man's awareness of impending disaster. "You get that feeling something bad can happen," says Munchak. "You think, Maybe I should get out of here."

With this in mind, they share a mantra: Move your feet. "When [coach] Andy Reid was here," says Todd Herremans, a 10-year veteran guard and tackle with the Eagles, "he would always tell us, 'Keep your feet moving and you'll never get hurt.' " During his rookie season in Jacksonville, Joeckel watched as center Brad Meester, who missed only 15 games in 14 years before retiring after the 2013 season, would run from play-ending piles as if they were giant heaps of skunks. "Not just moving," says Joeckel. *"Running."* Pat Flaherty has been the Giants' offensive line coach since '04 and constantly reminds the behemoths in his meeting room, "Get your feet out of the hole."

Veteran linemen sense when a play is dead, even if the whistle hasn't blown, and more important, they understand the need to get immediately out of Flaherty's metaphoric hole in the ground. "There are times when you can feel the pile starting to come down on you at the end of a play," says six-time Pro Bowl lineman Logan Mankins of the Patriots, who was rolled up twice in 2011, blowing out his MCL in his left knee and the ACL in his right, yet kept playing. "There are a couple of things you can do at that point. One is to just try to let your leg nearest the pile go limp and not fight the weight. The other is to just go with the pile, just fall with it. Sometimes you get in the most trouble because the guy next to you

has made a great block and just blown the whole pile right at you."

None of them admit to dwelling on any of this, except when it's time to dwell on it, in the moment of survival. "If you're thinking about getting rolled up before the play, or during the play," says Snee, "then it's time to walk away from the game."

INCIDENT REPORT: Pursuit Punishment

New England tackle Sebastian Vollmer is typical of NFL offensive linemen: impossibly huge but also shockingly nimble. Vollmer, 30, is 6' 8", weighs 320 pounds and moves like a tight end. "He has the kind of size which is rare," coach Bill Belichick told *The Boston Globe* last winter. "Strength, quickness, athleticism for his size that's pretty special." All of those qualities were on display last October on a second-quarter running play in Foxborough, when Vollmer drove Derrick Shelby, the Dolphins' 282-pound defensive end, from just outside the right hash mark to within two paces of the Pats' bench. Vollmer's block briefly opened a seam for running back Stevan Ridley, but Miami defensive tackle Randy Starks beat guard Dan Connolly and dived at Ridley as he tried to run past. While Vollmer chugged into Shelby, Starks slammed into Vollmer's right leg just as his foot hit the ground, breaking the leg. Vollmer could be heard on the CBS telecast, screaming in pain.

Ten months later Vollmer stood next to the Patriots' practice field and struggled with the moment. "I actually haven't watched it," said Vollmer in soft English, accented with his native German. "I know I was almost to the sideline. I tried to get out of there, but you really don't know what's behind you. Like I said, it's tough. Circumstances. Nobody does it on purpose."

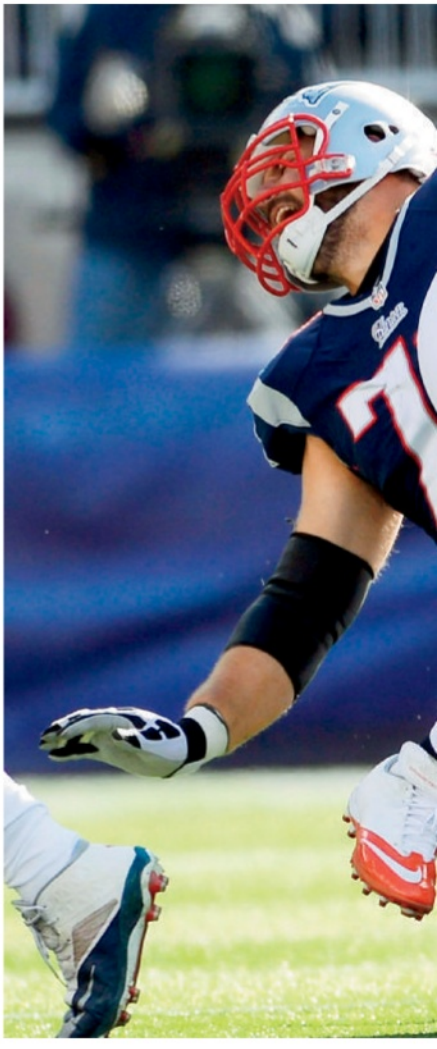
Linemen on both sides of the ball are members of an exclusive, lucrative and dangerous fraternity. The shared peril comes in the waning milliseconds of plays from scrimmage, just when roll-ups are most likely to occur. When Snee was rolled up in Atlanta by Wilson and Abraham, he was fighting Peters, but Snee remembers that Peters pointedly did not finish him off. "He kind of held me up after I got rolled," says Snee. "If he wanted to drive me backward over the pile in a weakened state, he could have done a lot more damage. Probably would have blown out my ACL in addition to the hip. If that were a younger player I was engaged with, it probably would have been a lot worse."

None of the offensive linemen will admit to dwelling on any of this, except when it's time to dwell on it, in the moment of survival.

Tacit deals like this one are agreed upon and executed dozens of times in every game. "There definitely comes a time in some plays where it's like, with two veteran guys, O.K., abandon your assignment, save your career," says Herremans. "Usually that's right after the play has been made somewhere else."

Joeckel, just a second-year player, says, "I've noticed a difference between the NFL and college. I'm not saying people take it easy, but I haven't seen many guys who will flip you over the pile in the NFL. There were a lot of those in college." Players taking 70 snaps are also less likely to behave recklessly than situational players getting limited runs. "[Defensive players] who get 10 or 15 snaps are high-motor guys, that's just how they play," says Munchak. "You need to know at all times who is across from you."

Early in his career, Snee developed a habit of breaking stalemates by throwing defenders to the side, and he was only occasionally called for holding. But in his third season he heaved a Bears defender onto the back of teammate Luke Petitgout's legs, breaking Petitgout's fibula. "After that," says Snee, "I eliminated the throwing from my game." But



MICHAEL PEREZ/AP

C.J. GUNTHER/EPA

many linemen still toss defenders, and defenders toss linemen. There is often a man—often a teammate—in the landing zone.

INCIDENT REPORT: Collateral Damage

On a running play in the second week of 2012, Eagles second-year center Jason Kelce was expected to execute a reach block on Ravens nosetackle Terrence Cody and help open a hole for LeSean McCoy. Kelce performed the block superbly, but as McCoy raced into the gap, veteran free safety Ed Reed dived at McCoy with his head down. McCoy hurdled the attempt, but Reed's momentum carried his helmet and shoulder into Kelce, collapsing his right knee and blowing out his MCL, while partially tearing his ACL.

+ OUT OF ACTION
Vollmer (76) and Kelce (62) both missed significant time after getting hurt on run plays.

"It was kind of a freak one," says Kelce, "because you always want to keep moving, and I was moving, but it just so happened that his helmet hit my knee just as I was planting. You almost never see those injuries, but on that one I did see just a flash of purple at the last second, and I tried to step over the top, but I was just too late."

Mudd was coaching Philadelphia's offensive line at the time and was incensed at Reed for, as Mudd saw it, throwing himself recklessly into traffic. "Ed Reed was getting older and couldn't make the plays he used to make," says Mudd. "So he just dove in low with his head down." Reed did not disagree. "It was bad technique on my part, and I took out the center's knee," Reed told *Esquire* in the spring of 2013. "Our coach [John Harbaugh] talks to Andy Reid all the time, so I told Coach to send my respects for the center and let him know I didn't mean to hurt him, man. It was just the second game of the year, so he lost his whole season. That one preyed on me, man. I didn't know him personally, but I wanted to let him know that I had the utmost respect for him."

Offensive linemen are divided on whether run plays or pass plays are more perilous. Runs from scrimmage create danger by forcing multiple oversized men into a small space, wrestling with one another while running backs attempt to sprint up their backs for any small slice of yardage. It's fertile ground for roll-ups. But pass plays can be perilous too. Pass rushers wheel outside toward open space on the edge of the formation, building speed and creating torque as they try to shake free. But in lunging for the quarterback, a pass rusher often throws his lower body into blockers protecting different angles in the pocket, especially the tackle blocking the opposite-side edge rusher.

"One game when [quarterback] Donovan [McNabb] was still here, I got leg-whipped about four times," says Eagles left tackle Jason Peters. "You're just trying to hold off your guy, but as you get closer to the quarterback, you get in trouble with guys flying in the other way."

Interior pass blockers face a different issue. Defensive tackles and linebackers routinely run complex stunts, attacking the pocket from fresh angles and forcing offensive guards and centers to adjust their blocking positions. In this improvisational chaos, it's easy to lose spatial awareness and get pushed into pocket traffic. Addi-

tionally, says Kelce, "when you're pass-blocking, you really want to be grounded, with a strong wide base. Especially if some guy is bull-rushing you."

INCIDENT REPORT: Pocket Collapse

Jaguars second-year left guard Mike Brewster lined up for a second-and-10 play from the Bills' 33-yard line, an obvious passing down in a meaningless game last December in Jacksonville. Brewster, 6' 4" and 305 pounds, controlled Buffalo defensive tackle Corbin Bryant, but from his right, defensive tackle Kyle Williams came free at quarterback Chad Henne. Williams crashed into Henne just after Henne threw the ball, and both quarterback and rusher fell onto Brewster, who remained engaged with Bryant, his back to the action. The combined 528 pounds of Henne and Williams snapped Brewster's left ankle.

"Never saw it coming," says Brewster. "I was just blocking my guy, and they both landed on it. I felt the bone break, immediately, no question. Ideally you keep your feet moving, but in reality there's no way to do that because you're struggling with some guy who weighs 300 pounds. It's a very, very dangerous job. How many jobs can you have where a 300-pound man can fall on you and break your ankle in half?"

Some offensive linemen wear knee braces to prevent—or minimize—roll-up injuries. A smattering of NFL teams have required offensive linemen to wear braces during training camp in recent years, but none have made it mandatory for games. (Many major-college programs require offensive linemen to wear braces in both practices and games.) There are no conclusive medical studies on the effectiveness of braces, which have been in use since Joe Namath first strapped on his bulky Lenox Hill brace in 1965. Offensive linemen are divided: Some swear by the braces' protective qualities, but others complain about their mass and weight.

BLIND SIDED Neither Pouncey (above) nor Brewster (right) saw their fateful collisions coming.

Joeckel was required to wear them throughout his career at Texas A&M. He doesn't now. "The NFL is too fast a game," he says. "I need that extra step."

In four NFL seasons, Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey has had to miss snaps or games four times because he had been rolled up. He sat out Super Bowl XLV as a rookie after he was inadvertently rolled up from behind by Jets linebacker Bryan Thomas in the AFC championship game, and he was sidelined all last season after an incident in Week 1. He wore braces throughout his career at Florida but abandoned them in the NFL. No longer. "I was so happy to get out of college and throw those braces away," says Pouncey. "This year I put them back on. I'm a true believer."

That would make Kelce a half-believer. He practices without braces, "so I can strengthen the ligaments without support," but will wear them in games for an extra layer of security.

INCIDENT REPORT: Friendly Fire

Pouncey's worst roll-up injury came eight plays into last year's season opener against the Titans. On a rushing play to Isaac Redman, Pouncey was assigned to rub off defensive tackle Sammie Lee Hill, who would then be cut—blocked in the legs—by David DeCastro, a second-year guard who was making his fourth NFL start.

Pouncey sealed off Hill and was

ARCHIE CARPENTER/UPI/LANDOV (POUNCEY); STEPHEN MORTON/AP (BREWSTER)

in the process of shedding him in pursuit of a linebacker to block when DeCastro threw his body and took out Pouncey's legs instead of Hill's. "David estimated the cut wrong," says Pouncey. "I never saw him. In fact, I just barely remember it because I was in so much pain." The impact tore Pouncey's right ACL and MCL and damaged his PCL and meniscus. He is healthy and back on the field in 2014.

The play underscores the uniquely problematic nature of cut-blocking, some varieties of which were legislated out of the game in the off-season. During an interview at training camp this summer, DeCastro said he would prefer not to execute cut blocks at all. "I've always preferred to just stay up and move the guy," he says. "It's tough to simulate cutting in practice, because it's too dangerous. We use bags, but they don't move. The reality is that I'm just not very good at it. On that play, I didn't even see what happened. My aiming point was bad. I just tried to dive and roll into the nose[tackle], but Pounce was still there. I got all of Pounce and none of the nose." DeCastro paused. "It's difficult to talk about."

Yet intrinsically it's part of the deal they've accepted. "Complete accident," says Pouncey. "No hard feelings."

DeCastro stood in a grove of trees outside the Steelers' summer dining hall and took stock of his occupation. He was rolled up and tore two ligaments in his right knee during a 2012 preseason game, and missed most of his rookie season. "Honestly, I think it's amazing more [linemen] don't get hurt," he said. "There's a lot of people pushing, shoving and throwing each other around." He shook his head, then shrugged. "It's a random, violent game." Violent everywhere on the field, but nowhere more random than in the small space where linemen collide and giant men hope only to be spared. □

Football's Far East Division

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

Earlier this month, while you were so busy preparing for your NFL fantasy draft that you forgot to wear pants to work, a new football league formed in China. It's not real football, just the Arena League version, but the size of the field does not matter when you experience the thrill of watching someone score a touchdown while tearing his ACL. It's only right that we set up football in China. We owe the Chinese something for sending us all those fun toys that stop working after a few years, like plastic trains and Yao Ming.

I was hoping they would call the Chinese league the CFL, raising tensions with Canada, but they instead went with the China American Football League—proof that, no matter their racial and geographical differences, people will always choose the most boring possible name for a sports league. The CAFL is being launched by Martin E. Judge Jr., co-owner of the Arena Football League's Philadelphia Soul, in conjunction with the Chinese Rugby Football Association. The league hopes to kick off next August with six to eight teams comprising both Chinese and American players. (All of those clubs are currently in discussions with Brett Favre.) More teams will be added in the next few years, and organizers are optimistic that by 2020, dozens of Chinese arenas will be filled with fans ignoring the game in front of them as they monitor their fantasy teams on their phones.

It's nice that the Chinese will finally get football, but will they actually *get* football? Will they understand its appeal? Will they marvel at Peyton Manning, Drew Brees and Tom Brady? Will they pretend to understand illegal shifts and the pass interference rules? Will they see why true football fans debate who should be the Browns' next starting quarterback, even though they can't remember the Browns' last starting quarterback?

To Americans, football is like a picture of our kids. People in other countries might ask to see it, pretend they are interested, maybe even genuinely admire it. But we are the ones whose hearts swell. Football's concussion crisis has proved to be less a crisis than a reaffirmation of football's popularity. We may occasionally be turned off by the spectacle on the field, but the TV never is. Sometimes we try to quit football, but we always forget the reason. Perhaps this is why so many NFL players take Adderall.

The game's popularity is bulletproof, lawsuit-proof, even market-proof. On Sept. 4 the opening game of the season will pit Green Bay (the nation's 70th-largest TV market) against Seattle (No. 13), and it will still be one of the highest-rated programs of the year. For 20 years the NFL has ignored Los Angeles, the nation's second-most-populous city, and business is just fine, thank you.

Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban recently opined that the NFL is "10 years away from an implosion," which, if true, would make for an awesome TV show. Imagine the whole league bursting into a million pieces, with cheeseheads going one way, Bill Belichick's hoodie going another and Richard Sherman's mouth flying through the prime-time sky, chattering away.

Cuban thinks the NFL is playing games on too many days of the week—we're now up to Sunday, Monday, Thursday and sometimes Saturday. If the NFL ends up playing games on all seven days, it's only because Roger Goodell does not have the power to create an eighth. The NFL commissioner would like to expand the season to 18 games, which is a lousy idea, and put a team in London, which is a worse idea, and expand the playoffs, which is also a pretty bad idea but will probably happen next season. We can complain about a diluted football product, but we will still inject it into our veins.

The people of China may or may not share our addiction. Football is not for everybody, and it may be telling that we in the U.S. are obsessed with the sport while most of the world is obsessed with others. Some foreigners would say it's because we're self-involved and oblivious to the rest of the planet, but who cares what they think? It's football season, baby. Let's show all those soccer players what happens when a man is actually hit before he falls down. □

It's nice that the people of China will finally get football. **But will they actually *get* football** the way obsessive U.S. fans do?

Can arena football succeed in China?
Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@Rosenberg_Mike**

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